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*Oh my god, she's a boy!*

The online afterlife of *Sleepaway Camp* (1983, Robert Hiltzik)



## Abstract

Title: *Oh my god, she's a boy!* -The online afterlife of *Sleepaway Camp* (1983, Robert Hiltzik)

This study aims to examine the online afterlife of the slasher film *Sleepaway Camp* (1983, Robert Hiltzik) and how this afterlife relates to the queer elements in the film and its role as a

cult film. By combining analytical perspectives and tools deriving from film studies and media studies, through applying film analysis as a method and using a netnographic approach, the fields complement each other without cancelling each other out. The material gathered was then analyzed according to John Fiske's theory of primary, secondary and tertiary texts.

Certain patterns were distinguished from the material, and the study showed that the film was highly associated with cult culture and LGBTQ rights or cultures. The film could be activated in various ways by the secondary and tertiary texts, and the meaning of the film can be detected in the tertiary texts.

In the light of the positive climate that internet is for marginalized groups such as LGBTQ people and cult culture, it is also a fruitful climate for discussion regarding these subjects. This has been highly important in the afterlife of *Sleepaway Camp*.

*Keywords: Sleepaway Camp, LGBTQ, queer, netnography, cult, camp, identity.*

Cover page. Still from *Sleepaway Camp*

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## 1. Introduction

*Oh my god, she's a boy!*

The title of this thesis is one of the last lines spoken in the slasher film *Sleepaway Camp* (1983, Robert Hiltzik) and it is exclaimed by a camp leader when he sees that the protagonist of the film, Angela (Felissa Rose), standing up while her boyfriend's decapitated head roll off her lap, turns around and shows that she has a penis. Despite the fact that this scene reveals

that the protagonist is a murderer, the biggest revelation is that she has a penis. The camp leader doesn't exclaim "Oh my god, she's a murderer", but "Oh my god, she's a boy".<sup>1</sup>

I first heard of *Sleepaway Camp* in a list featuring "must see" slasher films. When I finished the film, I was in shock. Not by the fact that the main character, appearing to be a girl turned out to have a penis, but by the way the film treated this fact. I was appalled, thinking that there must be various academic theories about this. Being a big horror film enthusiast, I was surprised I had not heard or read more about the film before I saw it. When I began my research for this thesis, planning on writing about the film in relation to queer theory, I realized that there was a lack of research on this film in the academic world. But during my research, I found the film being referred to in other contexts on the internet. The film is referred to on online film fora in general but is overrepresented in fora relating to "queer". I then wondered why this was the results of my research. How come this film is barely mentioned in academic contexts (with a few exceptions) but still a hot topic within online communities, by young people who might not even been alive when the film premiered?

## 1.1 Purpose and Aims

The purpose of this study is to examine the online afterlife of *Sleepaway Camp* and how the way it relates to "queer" and "cult" is relevant for its flourishing state in the 21st century digital era. The study also aims to show how both departments of media studies and film studies are equally as important. To let the two research fields converge is necessary in order to truly understand why a film like *Sleepaway Camp* can receive a full-fledged life online.

## 1.2 Research question

It is possible to make the bold statement that the film *Sleepaway Camp* has gained a new afterlife online. The question of this thesis is what this online afterlife looks like. How is the way it relates to "queer" and "cult" relevant for its afterlife? What patterns can be distinguished in the way the film is talked about? How can we understand this afterlife?

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<sup>1</sup> *Sleepaway Camp* (1983, Robert Hiltzik).

## 1.3 Previous scholarship

### 1.3.1 The film research field – Cult, horror and queer

When discussing the representation of queer people in general, and transgender people in particular in *Sleepaway Camp* it is crucial to discuss the film historic context it is situated in. Films are one way of providing a view of phenomena in society, which means that examining society through film can be a fruitful way of learning about it. *The Celluloid Closet* (1995, Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman) is a documentary film that tells the history of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) representation in Hollywood film, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If every film is a representation of society, it is crucial that films represent the people who live in society. In the lives of LGBTQ people, to be able to identify with the culture one consumes means feeling like you belong. For a long time, LGBTQ people had to settle for identification with characters that in some way could be connected to being queer. In many cases, this meant identifying with derogatory stereotypes or characters that in some way could be read as queer or simply different. American studies and ethnicity scholar Jack Halberstam's book *In a Queer Time and Place, Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* examines mainstream Hollywood representations of the transgender body and productions made by queer people.<sup>2</sup> It is considered a pioneering study, as it is the first fulllength study of transgender representations in a number of media-platforms which is very relevant to the growing visibility of transgender people. Halberstam also examines the case of Brandon Teena, a young trans man who was murdered in 1993 and how this relates to representations of transgender people. The book's place within the research field is thus very relevant. Another important book in this field is film and media scholar Yvonne Taskers *Spectacular Bodies, Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*.<sup>3</sup> The book examines the homoeroticism surrounding action films and the focus on the muscular male body that she calls the "new man" that came with the action genre. This has been influential in the discussion on how gender and sexuality is perceived through film and media. For this study it is relevant in the section where the focus on the male body in *Sleepaway Camp* is discussed.

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<sup>2</sup> Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place, Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York University Press, New York, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies, Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*, Routledge, London, 1993.

Research by the cultural theorist Stuart Hall has been highly influential in studies on cultural representations. He argues that a common tool in representation of marginalized groups is stereotyping, which can be used as a type of exercise of power.<sup>4</sup> The representation of all marginalized social groups is not identical, a general feature is however a dichotomy of “us” and “them” which takes shape through exaggeration of differences. The research on representation of queer people is influenced by feminist film theory. Research by the film scholar Linda Williams has been influential within the field. According to her, the female character in the horror film is afraid of the monster because she recognizes herself and her role as freak in society in it.<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, the same could be said for queer characters. When presented with no character to identify, to turn to horror films and identify with the monster in the film because of its role as an outcast or a misfit has been the answer for many queer people.

According to the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey whose work is rooted in psychoanalytic film theory, films traditionally either fetishize or punish women through the narrative. The fetishizing is done through objectification of the female characters, by showing their bodies in fragments or making their body a spectacle in themselves. The punishment of women in films are usually centered around “strong female characters”. They are brutalized throughout the narrative. Queer characters are also often punished through the narrative. Even today, films depicting the lives of queer people often have a very tragic ending and depict sad events. It is possible to argue that this is because the films want to tell the stories of the lives many queer people lead, with harassment and oppression (often based on real historic people). The lack of films with a positive or neutral story portraying the lives of queer people is however still an issue. The film scholar Richard Dyer argue that representation, or lack thereof, has a very real impact on how marginalized groups are perceived and treated in society by reinforcing oppression.<sup>6</sup> In his book *The Culture of Queers*, he takes on a historical approach to the cultural implications of queerness, queer arts and media.<sup>7</sup> He discusses the phrase “queer” and its history. For a long time, the word was used to describe homosexual men in Western society. The sexual attraction between these men had three essential features, one of which being humanly problematic. This is something Dyer wants to investigate, by tracing the

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<sup>4</sup> Stuart, Hall, (red.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Sage, London, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Williams, ‘When the Woman Looks’, in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, Barry Keith Grant (red.), 15-34, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1996, p.15-22.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, 2. ed., Routledge, London, 2002, p. 1-5.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers*, Routledge, London, 2002.

essentials of queer culture and what it means for a sexual group to have a culture. Despite the past use of the term, “queer” has now been reclaimed by the LGBTQ community and is currently used as an umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities. Because of its inclusive function, I will use it to describe this social group of people who are not heterosexual or cisgendered (the gender identity that matches the sex that the person was assigned at birth).

When representation of LGBTQ people became more common in Hollywood films, the depiction was however still stereotypical and/or negative. A frequent depiction of transgender women has been as strange and often dangerous. In *Queer Images*<sup>8</sup>, film and media scholars Harry M Benshoff and Sean Griffin explains how this trope could be traced back to the old stereotype that queer people were dangerous, and the reason why horror films during the 1980s depicted queer people this way could be connected to a growing right-wing backlash toward homosexual people.<sup>9</sup> Censorship in Hollywood cinema that banned films from depicting anything that was considered immoral, called The Motion Picture Production Code, banned homosexuality from being portrayed. This resulted in more creative, subtler, ways of including gay references in films.<sup>9</sup> Because of this, many of the characters that can be read as queer, may appear derogatory, but was what the queer audience had to settle identifying with. Thus, a character that in our contemporary society may be considered politically incorrect or homophobic/transphobic might have been read as representation when it was released.

Through this search for identification, *camp* became an important cultural feature for many LGBTQ people. Camp is culture that is exaggerated and often theatrical. It is culture that dares to be different. In *The Culture of Queers*, Dyer explains:

First of all and above all, it's very us. It is a distinctive way of behaving and of relating to each other that we have evolved. To have a good camp together gives you a tremendous sense of identification and belonging. It is just about the only style, language and culture that is distinctively and unambiguously gay male.<sup>10</sup>

An important aspect of camp culture is how it at its core is critical of what is considered “fine art”. It is the distorted and exaggerated version of art which celebrates being different and lets

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<sup>8</sup> Harry M. Benshoff, and Sean Griffin. *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006. <sup>9</sup> Benshoff and Griffin, 2006, P. 179.

<sup>9</sup> Medium > Film: The Hollywood Production Code of 1930 <https://medium.com/@sophieclegh/how-did-the-hollywood-production-code-of-1930-shape-the-representation-of-lgbt-characters-in-film-93e92a4fec62> (Retrieved 4/4-2019).

<sup>10</sup> Dyer, 2002, p. 49.

queer people be themselves and create a community. This has resulted in a film culture where there was actually space for identification for queer people. Examples of this is *Female Trouble* (1974, John Waters) and *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975, Jim Sharman). Many people would like to argue that these films are not camp, but it is still possible to consider them in a context of a camp discourse. One of the most eminent figures in studies on camp is perhaps cultural critic Susan Sontag.<sup>11</sup> Her essay (that was posthumously published as a book in 2018) *Notes on "Camp"* was published in 1964 and has since then achieved the status as a classic.<sup>13</sup> In the essay she attempts that by 58 points define camp. Camp is a type of aestheticism that is typically considered distasteful or opposing "high culture", and according to her, it's apolitical. She also mentions that despite homosexuals not all having "camp taste", they do constitute the majority of the audience. Camp is a way for homosexuals to integrate into society through promoting the aesthetic sense, Sontag argues. Her 58<sup>th</sup> point could perhaps summarize what she thinks camp is really about:

The ultimate camp statement: It's good *because* it's awful.<sup>12</sup>

Films that can be considered camp can often receive cult status. The film *Sleepaway Camp* has since its release received the status as *cult classic*.<sup>13</sup> Media scholar Anne Jerslev is a highly influential figure in the studies of cult film. She argues that what defines a cult film is attached to its reception.<sup>14</sup> One way this reception takes shape is through cult events. She argues:

I am considering the cult event as an ancestral form of a more widespread culture of reception around 1990, thus representing a sort of cultural mentality to be found in the visual texts and then transformed and developed into a specific cult discourse by the cinema audience.<sup>15</sup>

In the introductory part of the book *The Cult Film Reader*, the film scholars Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik attempt to present the major elements that are typically included in films that are defined as cult and this is the definition of cult that I will refer to in this thesis.<sup>16</sup> These elements are however not what defines a cult film, it is rather features that can be

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Sontag maintained several other professions, such as filmmaker, philosopher, teacher etc.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Sontag, *Notes on camp*, Penguin Books Ltd, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Sontag, 2018, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Nightflight > Sleepaway Camp <http://nightflight.com/sleepaway-camp-another-great-cult-classic-summercamp-slasher-now-on-amcs-shudder/> (Retrieved 9/4-2019).

<sup>14</sup> Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik, (red.), *The cult film reader*, Open University Press, Maidenhead, 2008, p. 88-99.

<sup>15</sup> Mathijs & Mendik, p. 90.

<sup>16</sup> Mathijs & Mendik, p. 1.



detected in films that often achieve a cult status. It is first and foremost through the reception of the film that the status is achieved. A pervading feature is that the movies oppose the mainstream and challenge conventions through a variety of different elements. The mainstream audience often consider this type of films bad, and they are often financed by a low budget. The fans are however (and partially because of this) strongly invested in and continuously committed to them and they are received differently than mainstream cinema. It relies on the fans committing to the film through continuous and intense participation. This participation is often practiced through themed events, such as conventions and movie screenings which is a fundamental feature of the consumption of cult films. A sense of community and communion which can be compared to that of a religious cult (hence, the name) thus derives from going to cult events and being a part of this active celebration.<sup>17</sup>

Cult is thus a complex concept that involves various components. However, films that receive cult status generally oppose the mainstream or the “norm”.<sup>18</sup> This results in the admirers of cult films building a strong commitment with the films and the surrounding culture. They create a sense of community which is practiced through events (such as conventions and sing-alongs), clubs and fora. Internet has facilitated the communication for cult fans and created new ways of mediating thoughts. Through the easy access of culture and others with mutual interests, fan culture and fandoms are growing. Whether cult film fans can be considered a part of a fandom can be discussed, however, I find it, despite somewhat vague, entailing something important: namely the strong commitment that certain admirers keep with a cultural phenomenon and the interaction that occurs among these fans.

Cult films play with the conventions of genre by mixing or exposing genres' unwritten rules by mocking or exaggerating them. Intertextuality is thus a fundamental element in cult films. Because of its perpetual connections to genre structures and cultural phenomena's, the cult is located very much in relation to its cultural context.<sup>19</sup>

Since cult films position itself outside of the “norm”, it often touches on the uncomfortable and what is considered inappropriate. A component that is frequently used in films that receive cult status is gore (blood, violence, mutilation, decay etc.) which is mostly represented through horror film. Horror film in many ways pushes boundaries further and further away

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<sup>17</sup> Mathijs & Mendik, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Mathijs & Mendik, p. 4

<sup>19</sup> Mathijs & Mendik, p. 3.

from what is “safe” and “normal”. A common feature in horror film is depiction of the grotesque and the macabre, and feminist film theorists often criticize it for its misogynist and stereotypical depiction of women. The female character frequently plays the role as a sexual object which is eventually killed for her sins. The slasher genre is especially notorious for this problematic depiction of women. Slasher is a type of horror genre where the plot is based on a murderer that walks around killing people. A common feature is the murderer’s mobility, which means that the killer usually does not commit one massacre at once but walks around killing off people throughout the film.

Film scholar Carol J Clover coined the term “final girl” which refers to the female character that triumphant survives the narrative of the horror film. The “final girl” transforms from a victim, that is perceived as strongly associated with her “feminine qualities”, to a survivor that is perceived as strongly associated with “masculine qualities”.<sup>20</sup> She argues that we associate the qualities of being a victim to femininity and the qualities of being a monster or a survivor to masculinity. According to Clover, the identification in horror film is mainly placed with the victim.<sup>21</sup> What is interesting about this is that despite horror films notoriously bad depiction of women, it is the genre with the highest representation of women. According to studies by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, with support from Google.org, horror film is the one genre where women are seen and heard more than men.<sup>22</sup> This results in our identification mainly being placed with women in horror film. Yet, Linda Williams argues that female characters are punished if they try to be subjects in the narrative.<sup>23</sup> She argues that the female character in horror must “look away”, because by looking the woman has her own gaze, lust and agency. If she refuses to look away, she will be punished through the narrative.<sup>24</sup> If she does not look and thus has no own gaze, lust or agency, she will be rewarded. This is where she, according to Clovers theory, has potential to become the final girl. The woman who looks and the woman who does not look are often manifested through the “virgin” and the “whore”. This refers to a trope that feminist film theorist has traditionally criticized slasher films for entailing. The female characters are either depicted as “whores” or “virgins”.

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<sup>20</sup> Carol J Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, N.J., 1992, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Clover, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> About Google> Main > Gender equality film <https://about.google/main/gender-equality-films/> (Retrieved 24/5-2019).

<sup>23</sup> Grant, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Linda Williams, ‘When the Woman Looks’, in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, Barry Keith Grant (red.), 15-34, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1996, p. 15.

If anyone survives, it is the “virgin” and the first to die is the “whore”. The film explains who the “whore” is by showing her having sex, flirting or wearing something that is coded as “slutty”.<sup>25</sup>

In 2009 the American culture studies/popular culture scholar Joelle Ruby Ryan published a dissertation with the title *Reel Gender: Examining the Politics of Trans Images in Film and Media* on the subject of trans representation in film and media. Regarding the transgender representation in slasher films, she argues that the slasher genre generally depict transgender people as killers, thus embodying the trope of “The transgender monster”. She is also discussing the polarized depiction of women in slasher films, as either “whores” or “virgins”.<sup>26</sup>

Regarding representation of transgender people, Ryan actually includes *Sleepaway Camp* as an example, and thus constitutes one of the few exceptions of the lack of academic texts regarding the film and its connections to “queer”. She interprets the film as highly genderpolarized, homophobic and heterosexist. These issues are however not nearly as visible as the transphobia, according to Ryan. Angela is eventually presented as not just a boy but embodying the transgender monster. However, Ryan interprets Angela’s identity as representing not just a twist ending, but an embodiment of the fears, anxieties, terror and desires of sex and gender identity.<sup>27</sup>

Cult films often upset cultural sensitivities and taboos, however not necessarily through reinforcing them. By exposing them, the films can lead to discussion surrounding difficult subjects such as sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia. Despite progression not being the purpose, some films that simply break conventions by exposing (and sometimes even reinforcing) certain social issues cause discussion and in extension knowledge and awareness of them. The films that contain an ideological component thus has a potential to achieve a political status.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Joelle Ryan, ‘Reel Gender: Examining the Politics of Trans Images in Film and Media’, *American Culture Studies Ph.D. Dissertations*, Bowling Green State University, 2009, p. 214–215.

<sup>26</sup> Ryan, p. 217.

<sup>27</sup> Ryan, p. 218.

<sup>28</sup> Mathijs & Mendik, p. 10.

Because of the perpetual deprecation of the mainstream, the cult audiences strongly exercise a type of rebellious attitude by considering themselves as outsiders and challenging norms regarding what is morally acceptable.<sup>29</sup> The canonization of cult films is opposed to the official canon, it pays a great respect for freelance film criticism and is often exercised through unofficial sources such as blogs and customer reviews. This type of canonization has since the mid-1990s been called paracinema, and the attitude favors films that has something else to offer in entertainment than simply “good taste”. How the film is discussed in the margins of cultural radars is what truly is relevant in the cult community and these films has a significantly longer expiration date. The films remain a subject of interest for the cult fans for a longer period. Fact is, that time can rather be a factor that gives the film cult status since a film that is viewed long after its release may appear strange for the viewer.<sup>30</sup> Cult status can be achieved when strangeness is provided by spatial and temporal unfamiliarity through expressions, choices of clothing, social norms, cultural taboos etc. specific to this time and space.<sup>33</sup> These features often lead to discussions within the fandoms. Some discussion might surround the more light and comical features; however, discussions tend to surround more political questions which generally cause strong feelings as well. The discussions regarding political questions can both lead to stronger connections and create smaller communities within the fandoms, with members with similar opinions. Despite disagreement in specific questions occurring, a general moral foundation is to be found amongst the members. These communities being divided partly based on political views can also be based on the identity of the members and thus applying their own experiences on the films.

### 1.3.2 The media research field- Fandoms, social media and marginalized groups

The existence of cult communities has been strongly affected by the increasing dominance of the internet, both due to the easy access to cult films and the growing discussion fora. The term “fandom” is frequently used in the digital age to describe groups of dedicated fans of a specific cultural phenomenon. In his book *Digital Fandom: New Media Studies*, Media, film and communication technology scholar Paul Booth uses the metaphor ARG (alternate reality game) to describe digital fandoms. He describes an ARG as:

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<sup>29</sup> Mathijs & Mendik, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Mathijs & Mendik, p. 6–7.

<sup>33</sup> Mathijs & Mendik, p. 7.

a game played in the physical world that utilizes digital technology to help players solve and decipher clues and puzzles.<sup>31</sup>

These fandoms exist on dedicated websites and online communities, but also on social media platforms, such as Instagram accounts and Facebook pages. In *Studying Mobile Media: Cultural Technologies, Mobile Communication, and the iPhone*, digital ethnographer Larissa Hjorth explores the mobile phone's role in relation to notions of identity, symbol, culture, social life etc.<sup>32</sup> The practices of UCC (user created content) and UGC (user generated content) and its enormous impact signal the key role that individuals play in the success of mobile and social media.<sup>33</sup> The user as a central aspect of mobile and social media is connected to the politics of personalization, which increasingly permeates various aspects of Western society.<sup>34</sup> This type of participatory media where the user plays a central role needs to be studied with digital ethnography as a tool. One of the main issues surrounding media personalization is that of identification. Both UCC and UGC are strongly related to how it reflects the user's identity. The shift toward smartphones has blurred the boundaries between the private and public because it gets increasingly difficult to differentiate the leisure time from work time when a growing number of professions are dependent on communication through social media, emails and text messages. This has led to stress and pressure being an increasingly big issue, especially for working mothers in the western society.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to this growing pressure of always being reachable, social media has also been criticized for decreasing the genuine bonds and increasing the more superficial acquaintances in our lives.<sup>36</sup> According to studies presented in *How the World Changed Social Media*, by anthropologists Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes (among others), the notion that that social media is bringing further away from lived realities is not necessarily the case.<sup>37</sup> The purpose of the book is exploring different communities around the world to investigate the role of social media regarding politics, gender etc. The anthropologists whose work the

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<sup>31</sup> Paul Booth, *Digital Fandom: New Media Studies*, Peter Lang, New York, 2010, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Larissa Hjorth, Jeanq (Jean Elizabeth) Burgess and Ingrid Richardson, (red.), *Studying Mobile Media: Cultural Technologies, Mobile Communication, and the iPhone*, Routledge, New York, NY, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Hjorth, p. 191.

<sup>34</sup> Hjorth, p. 192.

<sup>35</sup> Hjorth, p. 207.

<sup>36</sup> Deborah Chambers, *Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2013, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa and Nell Haynes, (red.), *How the World Changed Social Media*, UCL Press, London, 2016, p. 112.

book is based on found that in for example industrial China, migrant workers with lives dominated by manual labor, the online world could make them feel more human because it gives them access to relating to others in a way they can't when they're working.<sup>38</sup>

The use of social media has significantly affected the state of personal relationships; however, internet and social media are still relatively new concepts and when studying them, our thoughts often derive from a location of pre-internet criteria for friendship and social lives. In her book *Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship*, media and cultural studies scholar Deborah Chambers explores how digital communication and new meanings of “friendship” concur. Opinions about digital media are often very polarized, it consists of the side that consider it creating a dysfunctional society, and the side that claims that it will break down social barriers and inequalities with help from the new global network. Both of the sides express a media centrism which claims that digital communication, located in the center of society, is the principal factor of social change; something that is inaccurate according to Chambers.<sup>39</sup>

Chambers argues against the claim that frequent social network site users are more socially isolated than occasional or non-users, social networks are rather shaping new ways of being intimate. Engaged with the disciplinary traditions of media studies and sociology, Chambers aims to explore the main features of changing personal relationships and modes of sociability in relation to social media and in extension develop a theory of “mediated intimacy”. Her study shows that people generally tend to use social network and other digital media to keep in contact with family members and friends.<sup>40</sup>

Despite social network communication occurring mainly between people who already know each other in real life, it does in fact often involve intensive social interaction. According to studies by communication scholar Avi Marciano presented in *Living the VirtuReal: Negotiating Transgender Identity in Cyberspace* (which I will return to in the section about the method used in this paper), the unique social setting that is created through the possibility of socializing from your own private realm is especially valuable to users who are members of a socially marginalized group. The article aims to examine what function the online world has in young transgender people's lives, in relation to the offline world, and how this helps

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<sup>38</sup> Miller, Costa and Haynes, p. 112.

<sup>39</sup> Chambers, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> Chambers, p. 9.

them negotiate an identity. The study shows that transgender users utilize cyberspace as preliminary, complementary and/or alternative spheres.<sup>41</sup>

The preliminary sphere offers the users the ability to virtually experience various situations before “entering the real world” (such as beginning a relationship online that potentially could be transferred to the offline world). The complementary sphere completes the offline world through working as another social arena in the world of the users. The alternative sphere provides the users with experiences that differs from those available offline, for example through virtual identity. This gives the users an opportunity to act out a side of their identity that might be difficult or impossible to show in the offline world. For example, transgender people can live as the people they really are without anyone questioning their biological sex.<sup>42</sup>

Internet thus possess an empowering nature through the sense of belonging and social support that being a part of an online platform can provide. The platforms where anonymity can be implemented provide a particularly welcoming environment for participants who are a part of a socially marginalized group and allow them to discuss sensitive topics.<sup>46</sup> The availability and convenience of online support is a crucial aspect of why internet is valuable for marginalized groups.<sup>43</sup> In the light of the positive climate for LGBTQ people online, the internet is also a fruitful climate for discussion of subjects regarding LGBTQ rights or cultures. In certain non-western countries it might still be difficult to perform non-normative gender roles online, but social media has created opportunities for online activism and visibility for LGBTQ people through the general visibility of individuals and groups online.<sup>44</sup> This has provided LGBTQ people with an opportunity to find others with similar interests and issues. The internet is full of fora with highly specific themes, some of which are separatist. This safe space, where marginalized people can discuss their obscure interests online, has been fruitful for the LGBTQ community as well as the cult community since a large part of the cult community consists of camp culture which is so highly associated with LGBTQ

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<sup>41</sup> Avi Marciano, ‘Living the VirtuReal: Negotiating Transgender Identity in Cyberspace’. *Journal of ComputerMediated Communication*. 2014-07-1, p. 826.

<sup>42</sup> Marciano, p. 830.

<sup>46</sup> Marciano, p. 826.

<sup>43</sup> Shereene Z. Idriss, Joseph C. Kvedar and Alice J. Waston, ‘The role of online support communities: Benefits of expanded social networks to patients with psoriasis.’, *Archives of Dermatology*, vol. 145, no. 1, 2009, p. 4651.

<sup>44</sup> Miller, Costa and Haynes, p. 125.

culture. This indicates the source of the flourishing state of *Sleepaway Camps* afterlife, but to further investigate it, I will turn to John Fiske.

## 1.4 Theoretical Framework

### 1.4.1 John Fiske on primary, secondary and tertiary texts

In his book *Television Culture* (John Fiske, 1988) media scholar John Fiske argues that it is possible to discuss intertextuality in terms of two dimensions: horizontal and vertical.<sup>45</sup> He argues that “texts” (films, books, television shows etc.) can be discussed divided into three different steps. One film can according to this theory be considered consisting of three different texts, the primary, secondary and tertiary. The primary text is a cultural artefact, a film for example. The secondary text is the explicit mentioning of the film, through discussion and criticism (journalistic features, studio publicity etc.). The tertiary text is the informal discussion, mentioning and criticism of the film that the viewers themselves produce (gossip, conversation and perhaps online commenting on a post regarding the film).

Within the horizontal dimension, intertextuality can be discussed in terms of primary texts that are explicitly linked, through genre or character for example. In this dimension, the intertextuality occurs within the narrative. However, within the vertical dimension, intertextuality can be discussed in terms of primary texts and secondary and/or tertiary texts that refer explicitly to the primary text.<sup>50</sup> In this dimension, the intertextuality occurs rather outside the film than within it.

In this study, the vertical and horizontal dimensions provide useful insights in how a text can be read. The primary text in this study is the film *Sleepaway Camp*, the secondary text is explicit referencing of the film through blog posts, forum threads etc., and the tertiary text is what occurs through the discussion in comment fields and comments on blog posts. This represents the vertical dimension of intertextuality. The horizontal dimension, however, could be argued to be represented through the film historic position of *Sleepaway Camp* where it’s put in relation to conventions common in horror film as a genre and the evil and villainous transgender character. This perspective of *Sleepaway Camp* is thoroughly discussed in the secondary and tertiary texts. The secondary text can activate the primary text in various ways,

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<sup>45</sup> John Fiske, *Television Culture*, Repr., Routledge, London, 1988, p. 108.

<sup>50</sup> Fiske, p. 108.



leading to the tertiary text where social relations are incorporated in the discussion of the film and presents a new version of the primary text every time it occurs. The tertiary text presenting a new version of the primary text through every discussion can be explained through the fact that an essential element of the text, film in this case, is what is said about it. This polysemy is however open for a variety of interpretations of the primary text that are made in relation to those preferred by text.<sup>46</sup> Fiske argue that there lies an instability in symbolic systems due to the fact that a final authoritative “meaning” that “truth” can be judged according does not exist. The existence of meaning is not impossible, but elusive and the search for it is thus unfruitful.<sup>47</sup> He claims that by shifting our focus from the text to the reading of it, we can study the meaning that emerge from the reading by a socially and historically situated viewer.<sup>48</sup> The meaning is thus determined in the social situation of the viewer.

The primary text can be structured by genre, which works to promote and organize intertextual relations according to the horizontal dimension of intertextuality in order to provide the text with a polysemic potential.<sup>49</sup> This is a way of categorizing the film and presenting it to the audience. In order to reach out to a certain audience, a film is structured according to the conventions and iconography belonging to a certain genre. By influencing which meanings are preferred by which audience, through its work in the economic domain and the domain of culture, genre works with constructing the audience and the text. This is performed by preferring some intertextual relations and the meanings associated, which are simultaneously proposed by the industry.<sup>55</sup>

In extension, this means that the social situation of a viewer changes the meaning of the film, and the films eventually changes depending on what the audience is expected to appreciate. What films targets what audience is connected to the genre, and the conventions within the genre is constructed according to other films and connect through intertextuality.

The primary and secondary text give rise to the tertiary text. It consists of the texts formed by the viewers, who forms a collective response.<sup>50</sup> Through the tertiary text, we can detect how

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<sup>46</sup> Fiske, p.118.

<sup>47</sup> Fiske, p. 116.

<sup>48</sup> Fiske, p. 117.

<sup>49</sup> Fiske, p. 114.

<sup>55</sup> Fiske, p. 114.

<sup>50</sup> Fiske, p. 124.

<sup>57</sup> Fiske, p. 108.

the primary and secondary texts are perceived and circulated among the viewers. It is thus in the tertiary text that meaning can be detected. According to Fiske's theory, the life of texts can thus be compared to a cycle, where the primary text ends in a new primary text with slight changes. Within the vertical dimension, this is where intertextuality occurs, through primary texts and secondary and/or tertiary texts that refer explicitly to the primary text.<sup>57</sup>

I will apply this theory on my study of *Sleepaway Camp* and its afterlife. The theory is highly applicable on my study because the material of it is organically divided into three stages. I see the film as a primary text shaped through conventions of genre, circulated through intertextuality. The secondary text consists of the explicit reference to the film in formal contexts, which is based on the expectations of these conventions and how the film follows them. This leads to the tertiary text, the public mentioning of the film. Here, the primary and the secondary text is of great importance. How the viewer perceives the primary text and how they interpret the secondary text affect their overall impression, and this is where meaning emerges. Fiske published this theory in 1988 and mainly discussed tv-shows. The cultural landscape has changed significantly since then, and today, both secondary and tertiary texts can exist online. This reduces the boundaries for the formal and informal. What defines the secondary versus the tertiary text today? In 1988, the secondary text was to be found in journalistic features, discussions by tv panels etc. The tertiary text was to be found in gossip and perhaps letters to the editor in magazines. These sources still exist today. The texts are however more likely to be found online in articles, blog posts, forum discussions, tweets etc. where the status of the writer is ambiguous. Is it formal or informal? I have decided to interpret all sources that formally refer to the film as secondary, and all sources that refer to the secondary text and/or are replied to by someone and thus giving rise to communication as tertiary texts. I have interpreted the tertiary texts this way because it indicates the emerge of meaning. Through the convergence of the primary and secondary text, by discussing the film as a primary text in relation to blog posts etc. as secondary texts, the tertiary text is formed. This is where it becomes clear that the primary and the secondary text influence the final opinion.

## 1.5 Method and Material

### 1.5.1 Presentation of material

Deriving from Fiske's theory, I have divided my material accordingly: my primary material will be the film. I will investigate the film with analytical perspectives and tools deriving from film studies. My secondary material will consist of articles, blog posts, event descriptions etc. that in various ways mention or discuss the film in relation to its queer connotations. My tertiary material will consist of the communication that occurs in the previously mentioned online communities.

Because my interest for this specific film is connected to how it deals with Angela's sexual identity and gender, I will base my research on websites where the film is referred to in relation to the concept of "queer" and distinguish patterns in how they talk about this. The very core of this thesis consists of internet-based material, because this specific film is rarely mentioned in academic literature, despite its relevance for these books. The film is more than thirty years old, yet it is still referred to on different online fora, but not in academic texts. I consider there being a lack of academic discussion regarding this film. There is a new generation of queer communities, and they are still discussing this film. But the discussion occurs on the internet, where the interest for discussing "queer culture" is growing. As I previously stated, it is possible to claim that *Sleepaway Camp* has gained a new afterlife online through the fora and communities that communicate the complexity of the film. It is not just interesting to see what people write online about the film regarding its queer connotations, but to read it *because* it is online.

Initially, I have searched on Google for posts on fora that have included *Sleepaway Camp* and a discussion concerning LGBTQ identity. To refine my selection, I included *Sleepaway Camp* in combination with a few keywords in my search on Google. The keywords I included in my research and approximately how many results they generated are listed below:

- Queer (49 300)
- Transgender (26 400)
- Gay (179 000)
- LGBTQ (19 100)
- Sexual identity (104 000)

I then selected the results that were listed as most relevant for my search according to Google, examined them and attempted to further narrow the selection down to containing the examples I find the most relevant, which consist of 25 examples. From there, I have tried to distinguish patterns in the discussions based on what they talk about and how they talk about it. I have applied netnography and digital ethnography as methods when studying the secondary and tertiary texts.

### 1.5.2 Film analysis

When discussing the primary text, I have applied analytical perspectives and tools deriving from film studies as a method. This means that I have attempted to understand the film according to my knowledge and established theories within the field. I have first attempted to summarize the film and present some general information about it. Then I distinguished some eminent features and tried to interpret how these affected the narrative. I mainly discuss the film from the perspective of feminist film theory and is applying concepts by Linda Williams and Carol J. Clover among others.

### 1.5.3 Netnography

I have applied netnography as a method to study the secondary and tertiary texts.

Netnography, or virtual ethnography, refers to an ethnographical method applied and conducted on the internet. *Netnografi: att Forska om och med Internet* provides an insight of how internet, the relatively new phenomenon, can be used to understand people and the social events occurring on internet.<sup>51</sup> Netnography emerged to answer questions regarding whether the social interaction occurring on digital spaces differ from that of physical spaces.<sup>59</sup>

It is practiced through, for example, documenting a specific behavior performed within a specific group (the same way as practiced in traditional ethnography, with the only difference that the data is collected on the internet). The purpose is to understand and interpret internet in order to understand and interpret the cultural and social life that exists on and through the internet.<sup>52</sup> A common belief is that “the offline” (the physical everyday life) is essentially separated from “the online” (or the digital world). This obstructs our understandings of how

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<sup>51</sup> Martin Berg, *Netnografi: att Forska om och med Internet*, 1. uppl., Studentlitteratur, Lund, 2015. <sup>59</sup> Berg, p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> Berg, p. 10.

the online world can be made a space where people feel at home, by making the mediums their own. In order to understand this, we need to start to perceive the internet as something strongly integrated in our everyday life, embedded in our social spheres and structures, and not something that is spatially disconnected from it.<sup>53</sup>

Research on social interactions online has developed fundamentally since 1997 when the word “netnography” was coined by Robert V. Kozinet.<sup>54</sup> Internet was not a natural part of people’s life in the way it is today, thus there was no general understanding on how ethnographic studies should be performed online. The offline and the online dimensions were perceived as essentially different which mediated the view that the online world was completely separated from the everyday life. Today, there is a general idea that because internet is so widely used, anyone could understand it and thus, there is no need to problematize it. Both of these views are flawed, according to Berg. He argues that we rather need to study the internet in itself and to some sense return to studying internet as a digital constitution.<sup>55</sup> Despite internet not possessing the power to fundamentally change the society, it has contributed to changes important enough to take into consideration when studying social life.

By taking the digital dimension into account, we reach a deeper understanding of the physical dimension of social life because interaction in our contemporary society is highly affected by the internet. We need to abandon the idea that the offline world is more “real” than the online world and the two are distanced from each other. Internet need to be understood as a set of technologies that are used in different ways depending on who is using it, and on the social physical environment the person is located in.<sup>64</sup>

Today, our internet-based communication to a great extent occurs on social media platforms through mobile units. This has made the internet more accessible for a larger amount of people who participates in online communities where the individual is in the center.<sup>56</sup> Due to the largely text-based communication online, the users on websites already perform the tasks ethnographers traditionally practice and thus, the netnographers can take on the task to

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<sup>53</sup> Berg, p. 26.

<sup>54</sup> Berg, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> Berg, p. 12.

<sup>64</sup> Berg, p. 25.

<sup>56</sup> Berg, p. 27.

interpret this information.<sup>57</sup> Contemporary studies consider the digital and the physical dimension as an empirical social arena where the digital identity is simply an extension of that of the physical life.<sup>58</sup> A constant flow of connection between the offline and the online dimension indicate a concrete communication.

Berg explains that we need to understand the spheres that we chose to study in relation to action and social practices as naturally occurring.<sup>59</sup> We then need to formulate a scientific question, meanwhile identifying some basic requirements for the empirical contexts that might be appropriate for a netnographic research project.<sup>60</sup> The research question should be connected to our previous knowledge and our analytical toolbox. We need to have an initial assumption on where we might end up, however, our knowledge will develop along the road. It is not until the end that we can really understand how the empirical field is defined. When we have distinguished a digital context to be the subject of our study, we need to contemplate on how it should be studied. An active and regular communication or interaction between a stabile core of members is crucial to be found. The nature of this group and the type of communication occurring is however dependent on the research question, what is important is that there is a quantity of information that could lead to intriguing interpretations.<sup>61</sup>

Berg presents an example of a study by Christine Hine where she, by simply searching on Google, discovered a wide variety of websites of relevance for her study on a tv show. She could then develop an understanding for various dimensions of the tv show, by discovering the fan-based communities and official websites dedicated to the show.<sup>71</sup> This is similar to the type of netnographic study I aim to practice. By doing an open search on Google, I have discovered a rich collection of material that provides me with an understanding of how *Sleepaway Camp* is discussed online. The digital contexts I have based my study on consist of an active and regular interaction or communication in the sense that they are generally contemporary. However, my study aims to interpret what the film *Sleepaway Camps* online afterlife looks like. My method is thus customized to successfully examine this, and I have therefore decided to include examples that are not necessarily contemporary. What is crucial

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<sup>57</sup> Berg, p. 37.

<sup>58</sup> Berg, p. 36.

<sup>59</sup> Berg, p. 41.

<sup>60</sup> Berg, p. 75.

<sup>61</sup> Berg, p. 79.

<sup>71</sup> Berg, p. 80.

however is that they are internet-based. My study regards, first and foremost, the film and its online afterlife. The online afterlife is to be found mainly in blog posts and similar contexts, that could on one hand be argued to be a type of communication. However, on the other hand, it could be argued that a type of reply needs to be included in order for it to contain actual communication or interaction. The basic requirements for the empirical contexts that I have identified is that, in order to benefit my study, the contexts need to include a discussion on *Sleepaway Camp* and its connection to “queer”. The particular key words used in the research are included in the section regarding my material. This digital context is studied through distinguishing patterns in the material discovered and then, with help from Fiske’s theory, discuss them in terms of primary, secondary and tertiary texts. The purpose of this is to eventually possess an understanding of the online afterlife of *Sleepaway Camp*.

In the previously mentioned article *Living the VirtuReal: Negotiating Transgender Identity in Cyberspace*, Marciano applies a virtual ethnography and discourse analysis on a few examples of transgender online communities, in order to examine how transgender users treat the internet as a tool to negotiate their gender identity.<sup>62</sup> Discourse analysis aims to study discursive practices, i.e. interpretively analyze a social phenomenon and examine how they are produced and maintained.<sup>63</sup> Virtual ethnography highlights the importance of in-depth engagement in the field and makes use of the social interactions and open context that is cyberspace. His definition of the research is “an online research that applies ethnographic methods to the study of mediated interactions and cultures.”<sup>74</sup>

He investigates two online arenas, the newsgroup “transgender & friends” and the website “GoTrans”, both central to the Israeli transgender community. Instead of depicting the offline and the online spheres as separated, as it traditionally has been treated in internet research, he claims that the offline and online worlds exist in a symbiosis. To describe this, he coins the expression “VirtuReal”.

Due to the fact that many contemporary researchers either acknowledge the empowering potential of the internet or emphasize aspect of inequality in online participation, Marciano

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<sup>62</sup> Marciano, p. 824-838.

<sup>63</sup> Marciano, 2014. P. 829.

<sup>74</sup> Marciano, 2014. P. 829.

chose to focus on the negotiation between transgender people and the cyberspace in order to understand how they use the internet and how online discourse shape their experiences.<sup>64</sup>

He makes two important statements: 1. Every ethnographer should position themselves somewhere between full participant and full observer. 2. Online “lurking” is not enough to produce appropriate ethnography; however, it might be harmful to intervene with the natural dynamics in the field. Thus, he chose to take part in various community events that gave him a deeper engagement in the transgender culture. The analysis process was divided into two parts where he first classified the texts into thematic categories and then applied discourse analysis on the sampled texts.<sup>65</sup>

I will, with a few exceptions, apply Marciano’s method on my analysis. I will follow the analysis process used in his study by distinguishing patterns in how the film was discussed and then interpret these patterns in relation to how they are produced and maintained. The subject I will investigate is however more specific than that of the article, thus I will need to gather samples from various online communities that might not be connected to each other more than that they both relate to *Sleepaway Camp* and “queer”. I do not communicate with any of the people I refer to since my question is not regarding the people, but what they write. It will thus not always be possible for me to have knowledge of the gender behind the debaters, but since my question is regarding the discourse of a discussion of a film and not the people who discuss it, this is not a problem. My study also centers around how a social phenomenon is produced and maintained in the sense that it analyzes how the online afterlife of *Sleepaway Camp* is maintained and produced, by investigating how it is discussed and therefore maintained. This is practiced through examining the social interactions and open context online.

## 1.6 Disposition

The analysis of this study will be divided into three parts, according to Fiske’s theory of primary, secondary and tertiary texts. Chapter two consists of the film as primary text. Chapter three consists of the blog/forum posts as secondary texts. Chapter four consists of the

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<sup>64</sup> Marciano, 2014. p. 827.

<sup>65</sup> Marciano, 2014. p. 829.



comments and answers to these posts as tertiary texts. Chapter five is where the conclusion and results are presented.

## 2. The primary text

The primary text is, according to Fiske's theory, a cultural artefact such as a film: in this case *Sleepaway Camp*. It was directed by Robert Hiltzik and premiered in 1983. Due to their similarities in location and genre, it was initially criticized for being too similar to *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980, Sean S. Cunningham).<sup>66</sup> It was however followed by several sequels, the first two being *Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers* (1988) and *Sleepaway Camp III: Teenage Wasteland* (1989), both directed by Michael A. Simpson. It has over the years been considered a cult classic and there is currently an ongoing project in making a crowd funded documentary about *Sleepaway Camp*, called *Angela- The official Sleepaway camp documentary*. Information about it can be found on its official Facebook page or in the trailer on YouTube.<sup>67</sup> This indicates a thriving interest in the film that is mediated on the internet.

The film takes place at Camp Arawak, a summer camp located in New York State, in the early 1980's and our leading protagonist is the young camper Angela (Felissa Rose), who only utters a few words during the whole film. She is traumatized from bearing witness to the death of her father John (Dan Tursi) and sibling, caused by irresponsible teenagers (perhaps camp leaders at Camp Arawak) who accidentally steered a boat into them in a lake connected to Camp Arawak, when she was a child. After this tragic event she lives with her aunt Martha (Desiree Gould) and Martha's son/Angela's cousin Ricky (Jonathan Tierston). Throughout the film, the girls at the camp bully her and the boys tries to flirt with her, without result, leading them to bully her as well. Ricky, who is also at the camp with her, defends her against the bullies and his best friend Paul (Christopher Collet) falls in love with her. He is the only person she exchanges a few words with, and they engage in some sort of romantic relationship. Though, Angela's main bully Judy (Karen Fields) does everything in her power

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<sup>66</sup> Bloody disgusting> Reviews> Sleepaway Camp

<https://web.archive.org/web/20120607082324/http://bloodydisgusting.com/reviews/108376/sleepaway-camp-2/> (Retrieved (21/5-2019)).

<sup>67</sup> Facebook> Angela- The Sleepaway Camp <https://www.facebook.com/Angela-The-Sleepaway-CampDocumentary-498097090597431/> (Retrieved (21/5-2019)).

Youtube> Angela- The Official Sleepaway Camp Documentary INDIEGOGO [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6k10xzmVk0&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1H8Ym4dBy8zDRgi67ha2YbBgYwg3zu\\_vNS0b67BKTn70tq7fTpwxIChig](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6k10xzmVk0&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1H8Ym4dBy8zDRgi67ha2YbBgYwg3zu_vNS0b67BKTn70tq7fTpwxIChig) (Retrieved (21/5-2019)).

to sabotage her life, and seduces Paul, resulting in Angela catching the two of them making out in the forest.

Early in the film, a murder is committed, and they keep occurring throughout the film. It escalates at the end and we finally find out Angela is the killer, by seeing her naked with Paul's body in her arms. When she turns around, we are surprised to see that she has a penis and a hairy chest. When we see her nude body, it almost appears as if she is a werewolf or a monster. We learn that she is the one who committed all the murders, presumably as revenge for the spiteful treatment she suffered. We are presented a flashback to when she first moved in with her eerie aunt Martha, which shows how Angela, or Peter (Maximo Gianfranco Sorrantino) which was his actual name, is told by Martha that he will now take the role as his dead sister Angela (Colette Lee Corcoran). She tells Peter how she always wanted a little girl, and another boy "just won't do".

When seeing the film after finding out the big twist, there are many clues of Angela's true identity throughout it. In the beginning, we actually don't see the female child surviving. We just see John, the father, floating face down in the water, and a child struggling in the water. Eight years later when Martha, who is acting very theatrical to say the least, is sending off Ricky and Angela to the camp, she repeatedly refers to Angela as her "little girl". She touches Angela's hair and holds it in her hands, as if she is proud of her long hair. Before sending them off, she hands them their packed lunch and their physical exams, which he reminds them not to tell anyone how they got the signatures for. Ricky answers "No matter what they'll do, I'll never tell". Throughout the film, the campers become suspicious about Angela never showering together with them. She avoids taking part in the various activities planned and she never goes swimming with the rest of the campers. Judy questions this and start harassing Angela by saying "Are you queer or something?". Angela just stares quietly at Judy, making Judy even more frustrated. She finally exclaims "I know what it is, you haven't reached puberty yet!". Angela avoids situations where her body could be exposed, and she only speaks to Paul and Ricky throughout the film. This is provoking Judy, the male campers but also one of the camp leaders; Meg (Katherine Kamhi). In one scene Judy and Meg join forces and throws Angela in the water. Before kissing Judy, Paul makes a number of attempts to be physical with Angela. Angela seems tempted but rejects his approaches. In one scene, Angela and Paul are kissing at the beach. They fall down in the sand and when Paul starts to caress Angela, we are presented a flashback where Angela and Peter watch their father and his male

lover sensually holding each other in bed. Angela and Peter then sit in a bed, pointing at each other and the camera symbolically rotate around the bed. This suggests that the two kids are trying to learn about their gender and sexuality. We return to the beach and Angela pushes Paul off her and runs away. Angela seems to genuinely like Paul and she seems interested in being intimate with him. It rather seems as Angela's confused feelings toward sex seem to derive from her childhood experience of seeing her dad in bed with another man, and the fact that she herself is hiding something that relates to that experience. The fact that she moves in with her aunt, instead of the father's lover after the accident indicates that the relationship between the two men might not be official, which can give rise to her feeling of love between two men being forbidden. The patriarchy prefers gender and sexuality to be clear and follow a path that eventually benefits the nuclear family. We can of course not assume that Angela in fact identifies as a boy, she does however seem to know that the body she is hiding is not what is expected of her. In one scene Angela is throwing away candy wrapper and throws it into a waste basket from a few meters distance. She hits it and two boys approaching her exclaim "Nice shot". Despite being highly stereotypical, this could signal the idea that boys are better at sports than girls and give us a hint about Angela's true identity. This is some of the examples of the various aspects in the film that could be interpreted as coincidences if we did not find out that Angela is in fact a boy.

The film plays with gender and sexuality, however more or less subtly, in other ways throughout the film. Sexual elements are a common feature in horror films in general, and slasher films in particular (for instance, through the problematic dichotomy of "virgin" and "whore"). Yet, the way *Sleepaway Camp* deals with them is slightly unusual. One way the film deals with these issues is that the main motive for her killings are connected to sexuality or her fear of exposing her body. The first example is the camp cook, Artie (Owen Hughes) who is quite obviously a pedophile. He openly talks about how he is attracted to young children, by calling them "fresh young chickens" and "baldies.". He tries to approach Angela but is caught by Ricky. Artie then becomes Angela's first victim when she pushes his cauldron of boiling water over him. He doesn't die but is badly burned and has to leave the camp. Her next victim is Kenny (John Dunn) one of the boys that complimented her throwing skills. They try to flirt with her and invite her to go swimming with them. When she refuses to answer, they become angry and start harassing her. They are stopped by Ricky, who steps in and starts fighting with them. He is very protective of Angela and he fights with everyone

who treats her bad. After the fight, Angela's bullies go down to the beach and meet up with a group of girls, whom they try to convince to go swimming with them. Kenny and one girl row out in a boat while the rest of the boys get naked and enters the water together. Kenny makes the boat fall over, making the girl angrily swim back to the shore. Kenny stays, singing, under the boat until the killer suddenly appears. We cannot see who the killer is, but Kenny says "what the hell are you doing here? I bet the rest of the boys would be interested in seeing you". Throughout the film, we are provided hints that Ricky could be the killer. Especially after the fight, we are expected to think that perhaps it's Ricky that the boys would be interested in seeing. However, knowing that Angela is the killer, this statement sends out very different signals. Meg, the camp leader who threw Angela in the water, is one of the people who treats Angela the worst. She is stabbed in the shower and later found by Mel, whom she was having a secret relationship with. Mel wanted to keep the murders secret in order to not let it affect his business, and when he finds Meg, he is convinced that Ricky is the killer. He promises the deceased Meg to revenge her death, and brutally beats Ricky. Judy is the main antagonist of the film. She is killed when a figure comes into the cabin, suffocates her with a pillow and then inserts a hot curling iron in her vagina.

Another interesting aspect regarding gender is that not only do we suspect Ricky to be the killer, Jonathan Tiersten (the actor who played Ricky) was actually the one playing Angela in every killing scene, due to Felissa Rose (the actor who played Angela) being too young. In the scene where Judy is killed, it is clear that the face of the killer belongs to Tiersten. This has led to many fan theories, claiming that Ricky might be the second killer.<sup>68</sup> However, the fact that Tierston, a boy, is playing Angela, a boy forced to live as a girl, in certain scenes is interesting in itself. This could be argued to suggest a freedom in expressions of gender identity in a film where gender is a matter of life and death. Another important sexual element is something that contemporary viewers might interpret as homoeroticism. The male campers tend to take every chance they get to have physical contact with each other, they swim naked together and they are dressed in very short shorts, see through net tops and crop tops.

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<sup>68</sup> Fandom> Sleepaway Camp wiki [https://sleepawaycamp.fandom.com/wiki/Sleepaway\\_Camp](https://sleepawaycamp.fandom.com/wiki/Sleepaway_Camp) (Retrieved 5/52019).



Figure 1 Still from *Sleepaway Camp*

According to Yvonne Tasker, there was a shift in gendered, sexual and racial identities during the 1980s.<sup>69</sup> This mainly regards action cinema, but it did however reflect the influences of other media. This resulted in male muscular bodies being increasingly more exposed in film, representing a “new man”. It is possible to interpret this visibility of the male body as a reaction to the second wave feminism during the 1970s, by seeing the male muscular body as a sign of strength and traditional gender roles. However, it is also possible to interpret it as an objectification of the male body in a similar way as the female body has traditionally been objectified. This ideal of masculinity eventually led to a more caring and sensitive ideal during the 1990s.<sup>70</sup> Despite this type of ideal being surrounded by homoeroticism, it is difficult to determine whether this was the intentions when featuring men in crop tops in *Sleepaway Camp*. It could rather be considered an interpretation highly influenced by our contemporary conventions.

Johns lover, Lenny (James Paradise) witnessed the boat accident from the shore. We are unaware of the relation between him and the father at this point. He is telling John to hurry up, apparently aunt Martha is coming to visit. Peter asks whether Ricky is coming as well,

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<sup>69</sup> Tasker, 1993.

<sup>70</sup> Tasker, p. 331.

whereupon John answers that he is unfortunately spending the weekend with his father, which suggests that Martha and Ricky's father are divorced. In the flashback where Martha tells Peter about how he will now take the role as a girl, she says "You see, I always wanted a little girl. But of course, when my husband left... Oh well, that's all water under the bridges, I always say". This suggests that Martha entered a stage of mental instability when her husband left her and that she now, in her psychotic state of mind, makes the decision to change Peter's identity.

It is intriguing to consider Angela in relation to Clovers "final girl" and Williams' idea of the woman who "looks". We initially perceive Angela as a female victim subjected to bullying, sexual harassment and the tragic death of her father. She also turns down every opportunity to have sexual contact, giving us the impression that she is in fact "not looking". When she is finally exposed as the killer, she is very much a survivor; a final girl who is literally associated with her masculine qualities. By being the killer, she is also a monster. By being naked, she is sexual. She has a gaze, lust and agency. She symbolizes both sides of good and evil, and she is "looking". But she is not punished. However, as previously mentioned, the film plays with the sexual elements in various ways, including as a motive to kill. It is possible to argue that sexual promiscuity is a feature that can be found both in Judy, Meg and some of the murdered boys from the camp. The fact that Judy was killed by being penetrated by a hot curling iron in her vagina, and Meg was killed naked in the shower before her *rendezvous* with Mel could indicate that their sexualities were perceived as non-virtuous. Angela rejecting sexual contact seems to be partly related to her identity and partly to her past, it does not however seem to be connected to an absence of sexual feelings. Neither does it seem as if she rejects sexual contact with Paul because they are both boys, but because Paul does not know that she is a boy. In this context, it rather seems as if the punishment for sexual acts are related to Angela's confused feelings over her gender and sexuality, than an idea that being sexual is inherently bad. The sexual elements in the film seem to manifest Angela's confusion rather than a moral judgement.

Similar to what happens when a person in 2019 passes away, a film can continue long after the cinema has closed and the actors starring in it have retired, through discussion and *viva voce*. Through interpretation and nourishment of the idea of the film, the film will live on as long as it's mentioned. When a person in 2019 passes away, chances that the deceased person will leave the earth life with several accounts on social media platforms behind are vast. If the

family or friends don't ensure that these accounts are deleted, they can be kept in pristine condition until a time we have yet to encounter. These accounts can serve various purposes in the lives of the grieving and old acquaintances can discover the accounts and see them as a proof that their old friend is doing well, without the knowledge of their demise. This is just one example of how internet and social media are intertwined with our lives, as an extension of ourselves. Our social media profiles are one fragment of us, and when this fragment is still present, can you, then, really say that the person is dead? In one sense, it is possible to claim that every interpretation and the perception is just one fragment of reality. And the same can be said of cultural artefacts, such as movies. Years after a film is released, if there is mentioning of the film and discussion surrounding it, the film can never be claimed to be dead. Every interpretation and perception of it is just one fragment of its reality. It is a countless number of films, through every single interpretation of it. It is through these interpretations, made by a viewer from a certain social background, that meaning emerges. To lead us into the next segment, where these interpretations are explored, I want to quote the article 8 *Queer Horror Films to Watch This Halloween* by Sarah Fonesca:

There are multiple ways of interpreting Sleepaway Camp's trans killer. To one queer spectator, it's a gimmicky flick that pathologizes gender-nonconforming people. To another, it's about "a heroic trans girl who basically murders everyone who fucks with her."<sup>71</sup>

### 3. The secondary texts

The secondary text is, according to Fiske's theory, the explicit mentioning of the film. In my study, this consists of blog posts, articles, forum threads, lists etc. that explicitly reference to the film. Some examples reveal intense feelings, opinions and excessive discussions, and some examples just show the film being referred to as "queer" without any further explanation. I will present a few of the examples where the film is referred to as "queer", both with and without explanation. As stated in the quote above, there are an infinite number of interpretations of the film. What is interesting is that interpretations are made, what they say and what it means. I managed to distinguish certain patterns in the argumentation and mentioning of the film, and I have divided them according to these patterns. The first is *Defining the Genre*. Defining a film is performed in various ways, but generally by setting the genre. Categorizing a film according to a genre is a way of, with just a few words, speaking

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<sup>71</sup> Them> Story> Queer Horror Films List <https://www.them.us/story/queer-horror-films-list> (Retrieved 24/52019).

volumes about it. Through intertextuality, if one is aware of the common conventions of one specific genre, one knows what to expect when presented with a film that is referred to as belonging to this genre. This can both be used to promote a film (“if you like that one, you’ll like this one”) and to target a more narrow but committed audience, but also to reduce a film as something trite and thus dismiss it as not worth seeing. In reference to “camp”, Harry M. Benshoff argue that a film is often dismissed as not worth commenting upon if it is defined as “camp”, which he claims is related to homophobia.<sup>72</sup> In many of the examples used in this thesis, the purpose seems to be that by simply dividing the film according to genre in order to put it in relation to other films with similar tropes and narrative, making a statement about it. Deriving from this stage, the film can be discussed in terms of *Its Potential to provide Visibility*. The posts that are examples of this emphasize the aspect of the film as a provider of representation and visibility for marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ people. It is, however, not necessarily the case that the representation in itself is enough. The last pattern I detected in the argumentation and mentioning of the film is presented under the title *The Film and its Identity Politics*. The posts that are examples of this argue that the representation of a transgender character in *Sleepaway Camp* depicts transgender people as monstrous, something that when put in relation to the film historic representation of queer characters they argue is very problematic. When finding and distinguishing these patterns, practices deriving from media studies are useful. In order to analyze them, practices deriving from film studies are useful. The information provided by most of these examples regards the narrative and other aspects of the film.

### 3.1 Defining the genre

The first step in trying to understand a film is by attempting to define it. By defining the genre and discussing in what ways it can be interpreted, the people watching it can come closer to understanding what it tries to say and what they can do with this information. In some cases, simply defining the genre is enough for deciding where it positions itself in relation to certain issues. The examples I have chosen to include feature lists and events that, in various ways, attempts to define *Sleepaway Camp* in relation to gender, sexuality, queer or anything similar.

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<sup>72</sup> Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the closet: homosexuality and the horror film*, Manchester Univ. Press, Manchester, 1997, p. 187.



What is interesting is the fact that the film is coded as relating to these subjects, and the fact that this is how the film is perceived. It is thus canonized as a film that belong in this context.

Several of these examples also makes the case that *Sleepaway Camp* can be considered “queer horror”. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, a genre that is highly represented among films that receive cult status is horror. Due to internet being a fruitful climate for discussion of subjects such as LGBTQ rights and cult film, the combination of “queer” and “horror” that the film is argued to possess could point to the root of the alleged online afterlife of *Sleepaway Camp*. Something mutual for most mentioning’s of *Sleepaway Camp*, regardless of how it’s defined, is that it’s referred to as a cult or “campy” film.<sup>73</sup> Despite the fact that the accuracy in Susan Sontag’s claim that camp is always apolitical can be discussed<sup>74</sup>, it seems as the act of defining *Sleepaway Camp* as campy or cult is not made with the intentions of a political statement. It is mainly casually mentioned before getting into a deep discussion on another issue with the film. The film is also screened during a number of events, indicating its role in a network of cult culture where the consumption of the film through specialized events is at the core of the definition. This is an example of what Anne Jerslev means when she says that she considers the cult event as an ancestral form of a more widespread culture of reception.<sup>75</sup> Despite internet providing infinite opportunities to watch the film on demand, there is still an interest in watching the film at events which is typical for cult films.

On the webpage for The Hollywood Theatre’s you can find a description for the bimonthly festival QUEER HORROR. It centers around works by queer artists, performers and filmmakers that in various ways questions the relation between horror and queerness, and the feeling of identification for queer people with the monster. According to QUEER HORROR, horror has had a deep impact on queer culture. On a Friday in June 2015, the festival had a screening of *Sleepaway Camp*. They present the film as having an “undeniable queerness” and “a surprising amount of queer characters”.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Decider> Cult Corner Sleepaway Camp <https://decider.com/2015/10/14/cult-corner-sleepaway-camp/> (Retrieved 11/5-2019).

Horrormovietalk> Sleepaway Camp Review <https://www.horrormovietalk.com/2019/01/16/sleepaway-campreview/> (Retrieved 11/5-2019)

Nightflight> Sleepaway camp another great cult classic <http://nightflight.com/sleepaway-camp-another-greatcult-classic-summer-camp-slasher-now-on-amcs-shudder/> (Retrieved 11/5-2019).

<sup>74</sup> Benshoff, 1997, p. 187.

<sup>75</sup> Mathijs & Mendik, p. 90.

<sup>76</sup> Hollywoodtheatre > Events > Queer Horror Sleepaway Camp <https://hollywoodtheatre.org/events/queerhorror-sleepaway-camp/> (Retrieved 1/3-2018).

# SLEEPAWAY CAMP

Series: Queer Horror

Thursday, June 18 at 9:30pm | \$8 |

The Hollywood Theatre's new program QUEER HORROR returns with its first feature screening (from a rare 35mm print) of 1983's cult slasher SLEEPAWAY CAMP. Hosted by Portland's premier drag clown Carla Rossi, this special edition of QUEER HORROR opens with a dragtastic new horror short specially made to get you worked up for SLEEPAWAY CAMP.

Directed by Robert Hiltzik, SLEEPAWAY CAMP follows the painfully shy and slightly traumatized Angela (Felissa Rose), as she moves in with her eccentric (see also: bizarre) aunt Martha and cousin Ricky following a family tragedy. Martha sends the kids to Camp Arawak for summer camp, and soon after their arrival, a series of bizarre and increasingly violent accidents begins to claim the lives of various campers. Who is the twisted individual behind these murders? Beyond its undeniable queerness – and a suprising amount of queer characters



Showtimes  
Friday 06/19/15

Figure 2 The Hollywood Theatre- Queer Horror Event

Letterboxd is an online social networking service with the purpose to let movie enthusiasts share their opinion about films. The members frequently create lists over obscure movies with specific tropes. IMDb (Internet Movie Database) is one of the most popular web-based movie databases, which is since 1998 owned by Amazon.<sup>77</sup> The database is convenient for finding films, reviews etc., it is however not as user oriented as Letterboxd. The purpose of including both of these databases is primarily to show that the film is perceived in a similar way in various contexts.

The Letterboxd list “Horror Films, Gender Identity and Transphobia” was published in 2017 by the user “Stevenryderr”.<sup>78</sup> The description of this list claims that the movies included in the list is not necessarily transphobic and the purpose of the list is not to claim so, but that they in fact generate a discussion on gender identity in genre filmmaking. It can also be argued that the films are subversive rather than transphobic. The unstated gender of the killer is frequently treated as a shock for the audience. *Sleepaway Camp* and two of its sequels, *Sleepaway Camp*

<sup>77</sup> IMDb > Help > General Information > What is IMDb <https://help.imdb.com/article/imdb/generalinformation/what-is-imdb/G836CY29Z4SGNMK5?ref=seemr#> (Retrieved 28/4-2019).

<sup>78</sup> Letterboxd > Horror Films Gender Identity and Transphobia <https://letterboxd.com/stevenryderr/list/horrorfilms-gender-identity-and-transphobia/> (Retrieved 18/4-2019).

*II: Unhappy Campers* (1988, Michael A. Simpson) and *Sleepaway Camp III: Teenage Wasteland* (1989, Michael A. Simpson) are included in the list.

The letterboxd user “MundoF” created a list called “Opening the Vault: A Chronological History of Queer Interest & LGBTQ+ Cinema”.<sup>79</sup> In the description of the list, the user states that the purpose of the list is to present a chronological look at the films that have had lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer content. They also continue to talk about the argumentation that lies behind the inclusion of films in the list:

Now, there are legions of reasons why a movie might be considered essential to the LGBTQ+ community. As such, this broad and comprehensive list includes films that deal with or feature significant LGBTQ+ characters or issues and may have same-sex romance or relationships as an important plot - or subplot - device.

While some of the films on this list are queer by essence and by definition, others have only minor LGBTQ+ content, but they’re all here whether they have been seen by millions of people or just a select few. The films on the list come from all over the world and they cover the whole spectrum of the LGBTQ+ experience.<sup>91</sup>

*Sleepaway Camp* and its first sequel, *Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers* (1988, Michael A. Simpson) are included in the list.

The Letterboxd user “Nikai” has created a list called “LGBT Films”.<sup>80</sup> They do not give a presentation of what criteria’s they base the inclusion of films in the list on, they do however include *Sleepaway Camp* in the list. It is merely the fact that the film is considered appropriate in a list called “LGBT Films” that is significant.

The list “Out Of The Closets And Into The Cinemas!: Meeting Queer Folks in Dark Rooms” was created by the Letterboxd user “NeverTooEarlyMp”.<sup>93</sup> The purpose of the list is to compile a collection of queer characters, representations and sensibilities on film. The user

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<sup>79</sup> Letterboxd > Opening the Vault: A Chronological History of Queer Interest & LGBTQ+ Cinema <https://letterboxd.com/mundof/list/opening-the-vault-a-chronological-history/> (Retrieved 27/4-2019).

<sup>91</sup> Letterboxd > Opening the Vault: A Chronological History of Queer Interest & LGBTQ+ Cinema <https://letterboxd.com/mundof/list/opening-the-vault-a-chronological-history/> (Retrieved 27/4-2019).

<sup>80</sup> Letterboxd> LGBT Films <https://letterboxd.com/nikai/list/lgbt-films/> (Retrieved 27/4-2019.)<sup>93</sup>  
Letterboxd> Out of the Closets and Into the Cinemas Meeting Queer Folks in Dark Rooms <https://letterboxd.com/nevertooearymp/list/out-of-the-closets-and-into-the-cinemas-meeting/> (Retrieved 27/42019).

emphasizes that the list does not aim to include solely positive or even full-blown depictions of queer people, but rather document every representation of queer people that can be found:

From the realistic to the stereotypical, the explicit to the subtexted, the uplifting to the oppressive. We really are everywhere. (Except, of course, in the millions of films that pretend that we aren't.)<sup>81</sup>

They go on to say that the fact that films are included in this list can be considered a “spoiler”, because a character being queer is often used for dramatic effects in films, which is something that is frequently left to be the big revelation in the end of the film. *Sleepaway Camp*, *Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers* (1988, Michael A. Simpson) and *Sleepaway Camp III: Teenage Wasteland* (1989, Michael A. Simpson) are included in the list.

“Queer Films Everyone Must See” is the title of a Letterboxd list created by the user “Cherprayers”.<sup>82</sup> The list is the beginning of a “1001 Queer Films You Must See Before You Die List” (a reference to the book *1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die* by Jay Schneider<sup>83</sup>) that the user hopes to be able to create. They say that the films are covering any identity under the queer spectrum and despite some of them not being the best examples of queer films, they still have some good queer quality according to the user. *Sleepaway Camp* is included in the list.

The Letterboxd user “Newjerseynoise” created the list “Not Your Average Gay List” and explains how he, as a gay man who loves “trashy horror and exploitation movies”, is used to watching a lot of films where the female body is objectified.<sup>84</sup> He wanted to create a list of films where the male body is objectified instead and chose to include *Sleepaway Camp*. I interpret the inclusion of *Sleepaway Camp* in this case being based on its frequent depiction of men in crop tops and shorts and perhaps even the final shot of Angela’s naked body, however rather for the body itself rather than what it represents in the film.

The Portuguese speaking Letterboxd user “Veictor” created the list “Cinema Gay: Filmes e

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<sup>81</sup> Letterboxd> Out of the Closets and Into the Cinemas Meeting Queer Folks in Dark Rooms <https://letterboxd.com/nevertotoearlymp/list/out-of-the-closets-and-into-the-cinemas-meeting/> (Retrieved 27/4/2019).

<sup>82</sup> Letterboxd> Queer Films Everyone Must See <https://letterboxd.com/cherprayers/list/queer-films-everyonemust-see/> (Retrieved 27/4-2019).

<sup>83</sup> Schneider Jay, *1001: Movies You Must See Before You Die* 1001: Movies You Must See Before You Die, Octopus, 2016.

<sup>84</sup> Letterboxd> Not Your Average Gay List <https://letterboxd.com/newjerseynoise/list/not-your-average-gay-list/> (Retrieved 28/4-2019).

Curtas” (roughly translated to “Gay Movies: Movies and Shorts”).<sup>85</sup> The description of the list is also written in Portuguese, but roughly translated it says that it contains gay pictures, situations and characters. *Sleepaway Camp* is included in the list.

The film is additionally featured in several other lists on IMDB on the theme “LGBT horror”.<sup>86</sup> The lists do not provide any further description but indicate a certain perception of the film, namely the one that the film is neither just a horror film, nor just a “LGBT” film, but an LGBT horror film.

In April 2018, Zachary Paul posted the list (*Listicle of death*) *Five of the Biggest Genderf4\$!k Reveals in Horror* on “Bloody Disgusting”.<sup>100</sup> Paul defines “genderfuck” as when someone is deliberately sending mixed messages about gender, commonly through appearance. The issue is often that the films present the *Otherness* of men dressing like women as terrifying in itself. Despite the progress in societal views of “gender bending”, it can still be detected as a shock factor in various movies. Despite some movies’ desperate efforts to try to convince you otherwise, Paul states that being a maniacal sociopath or a serial murderer does not derive from being queer. Some of these movies treat gender bending and transsexuality as a shock factor, but some of them might want to send out a message. Naturally, Paul includes *Sleepaway Camp* in his listicle, questioning what there is to say about the film except “Angela’s a boy!”. He continues with mentioning the rumor about aunt Martha being a drag queen and explaining how the final scene made gave the film its legend status. Beyond that, including the film in his listicle is what speaks volumes about it.

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<sup>85</sup> Letterboxd > Cinema Gay filmes e curtas <https://letterboxd.com/veictor/list/cinema-gay-filmes-e-curtas-1/> (Retrieved 28/4-2019).

<sup>86</sup> IMDB > LGBT Horror Films <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls027395027/> (Retrieved 28/4-2019).

IMDB > LGBT-Related Horror Films <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls070934522/> (Retrieved 28/4-2019). IMDb > Top 100 Gay Horror Films <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls074360857/> (Retrieved 28/4-2019).<sup>100</sup> Bloody disgusting > Editorials > Listicle of Death Five of the Biggest Genderfk Reveals in Horror <http://bloody-disgusting.com/editorials/3491215/listicle-of-death-five-of-the-biggest-genderfk-reveals-in-horror/> (Retrieved 18/4-2018).



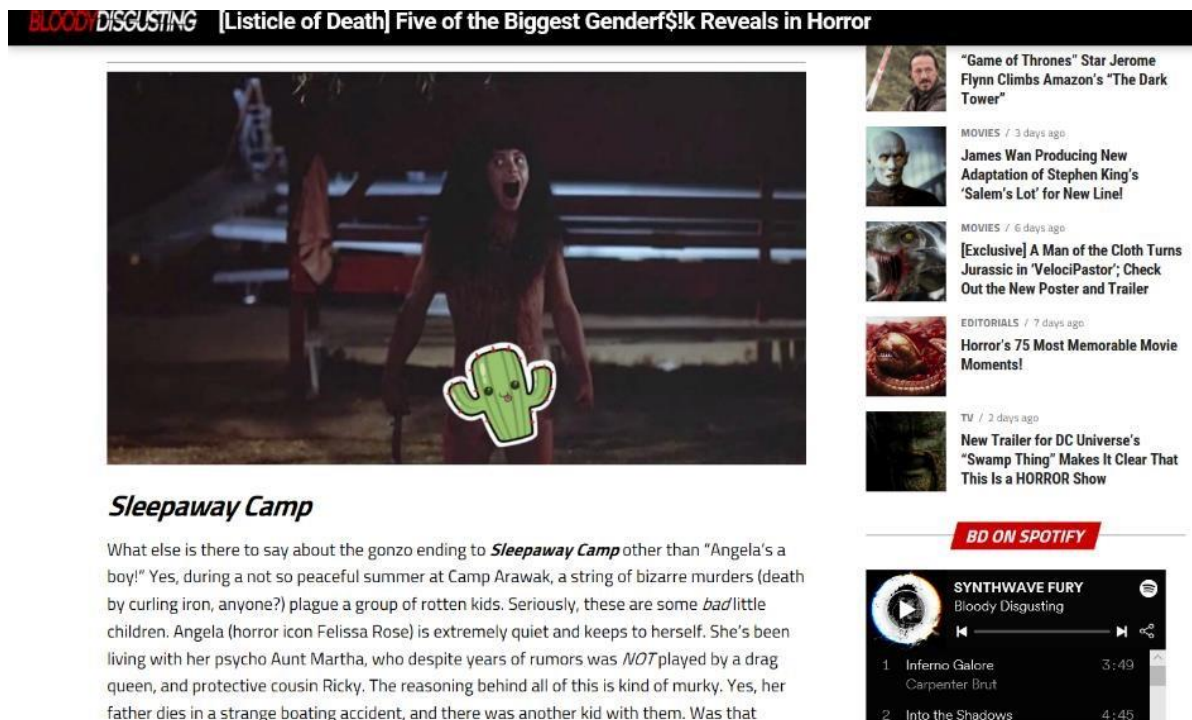


Figure 3 Bloody Disgusting- Genderf\$!k list

The vulture is the culture and entertainment site from *New York* magazine that covers movies, TV, music etc. In June 2018, the article “55 Essential Queer Horror Films” was published by Jordan Crucchiola.<sup>87</sup> The article is structured as a list but begin with a short historic summary of representation (or rather lack of representation) of queer people in film. This lack of representation led to, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, the depiction of queer people being reduced to existing only in subtext. Filmmaker thus had to explore more creative ways to include queer people in their films. On the rare occasions that queer people were actually depicted, it was often as villains, which resulted in tropes such as the “predatory queer” or the “monstrous queer”. Queer horror thus became a way to achieve visibility in some sense. The list is a guide to the, according to Crucchiola, most essential queer horror of the past 90 years.

Throughout the list, he provides a timeline of queer horror and explains the common traits in queer horror during specific times in history. Regarding the 1980s, Crucchiola writes:

As people were beginning to acknowledge the presence of queer commentary and themes in genre movies, an increasingly mainstream cultural presence for LGBTQ communities coincided with the

<sup>87</sup> Vulture > Essential Queer Horror <https://www.vulture.com/article/55-essential-queer-horror-films.html> (Retrieved 28/4-2019).

emergence of the AIDS crisis and a conservative political wave that ensured the survival of the monstrous queer.<sup>88</sup>

This resulted in various horror films during the 1980s assigning queer characters the role as murderers. The mainstream horror film became increasingly explicitly violent, due to the political climate during the Ronald Reagan where sexuality was associated with frightening violence and the success of a number of violent slasher films from the 1970s. This leads to the inclusion of *Sleepaway Camp*. Crucchiola argues that the climax of the film is the gendered twist and that the motive behind the killing, according to the film, is the gender dysphoria which is strongly connected to the stereotype of the monstrous queer.

## 55 Essential Queer Horror Films

By Jordan Crucchiola [@jorceru](#)



Photo: Sandrew Metronome Distribution/Miramax/Paramount Pictures/Getty Images

Figure 4 Vulture- 55 Essential Queer Horror Films

On [www.torontoist.com](http://www.torontoist.com), a website that publish online local journalism about topics that relates to Toronto, and a special interest in LGBTQ issues, you can find certain events that

<sup>88</sup> Vulture > Essential Queer Horror <https://www.vulture.com/article/55-essential-queer-horror-films.html> (Retrieved 28/4-2019).

take place in Toronto.<sup>89</sup> There is one specific event that is relevant to this thesis, namely the one that took place on July 30, 2013. Queer Fear, a “celebration of homo-horror”, was screening *Sleepaway Camp*.<sup>104</sup> On the page for the event, there is a still frame from the film, depicting some of the boys in tiny shorts playing with water. The description reads “Queer Fear celebrates the coupling of male short shorts and horror.”.<sup>90</sup> Jessica Buck, who wrote the event description writes that this film is among a few films they will be screening, where summer and tiny clothing is a given. She invites the guests to wear something similar (tiny and hot), but not to spoil the twist ending.

The image is a screenshot of the Torontoist website. At the top, the 'TORONTOIST' logo is on the left, and social media icons (email, Twitter, Facebook, RSS) are on the right. Below the logo, there's a section for 'EVENTS' dated 'JULY 30, 2013 AT 7:00 AM'. The main heading is 'Urban Planner: July 30, 2013'. The text below it says: 'In today's Urban Planner: dancing in Withrow Park, an open poetry night at Queen Gallery, and a screening of *Sleepaway Camp*.' It is attributed to 'BY TORONTOIST'. To the right of the main content is a search bar labeled 'SEARCH TORONTOIST' and a 'Social Media' section with a 'Follow @torontoist' button. Below the text, there is a still from the film *Sleepaway Camp* showing a group of young men in tiny shorts playing with water on a roof. Below the image, a caption reads: 'Queer Fear celebrates the coupling of male short shorts and horror. Still courtesy of Anchor Bay Entertainment.'

Figure 5 Torontoist- *Queer Fear*

<sup>89</sup> Patreon > Torontoist > Menubar <https://www.patreon.com/torontoist?utm=menubar> (Retrieved 25/2-2018). <sup>104</sup> Torontoist > Urban Planner July 30 2013 <https://torontoist.com/2013/07/urban-planner-july-30-2013> (Retrieved 25/2-2018).

<sup>90</sup> Torontoist > Events > Queer Fear Sleepaway Camp <https://torontoist.com/events/event/queer-fear-sleepawaycamp> Retrieved 25/2-2018).



These examples provide us with an insight into the perception of *Sleepaway Camp*. By including it as an example of a certain genre, it is establishing where the film is positioned and thus constituting a type of interpretation of the film as, in this case, a queer horror film.

Intertextuality is a web that connects the film to others by in different ways referring to other films that share similar traits. In this case the horizontal dimension of intertextuality manifests through genre conventions, and the vertical dimension of intertextuality manifests by defining the film according to keywords such as “queer” and “horror”. This is a way for fans to recommend the film to others with the same taste and thereby target a narrow but committed audience. However, by defining the film according to these keywords, it also positions itself far from the mainstream cinema and the general idea of high art. Through defining it as “queer horror” because of its non-normative features it can be categorized as campy. Through the reception of a committed audience who celebrate it with specialized events its cult status is established.

### 3.2 The film and its potential to provide visibility

Most of the posts regarding the film claim that there are certain problematic aspects of the film. Some of them argue that despite these problematic aspects, the film does however provide something else that is meaningful. Either, it's the depiction of someone who is not cisgendered, a more honest mediation of sexual elements in a time when everything was taboo or something that is not related to sex or gender at all, but mainly, it's the representation of transgender people provided by the film. This means that despite the problematic depiction, the fact that the film features a character that is or can be coded as transgender means that there is a representation which in extension means that transgender people watching the film can find someone to identify with. What the film and these posts both possess is a type of potential to provide visibility. In his article *The New Visibility*, John B. Thompson explains how the development of the media has resulted in a mediated visibility of individuals, movements, events etc.<sup>91</sup> These posts argue that *Sleepaway Camp* provides a type of visibility for marginalized groups, however, the following posts themselves provide a similar visibility simply by discussing these subjects.

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<sup>91</sup> John, B. Thompson, “The New Visibility”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 22, Issue 6, 2005, p31-51. 21p.

I failed to find a description of the blog [smclean24.wordpress.com](https://smclean24.wordpress.com), except that the author is called Saoirse and the blog centers around trans women characters in gore and horror stories.<sup>92</sup> The blogger writes a review of *Sleepaway Camp* and claims that the ending i.e. the plot twist where we learn that Angela is a boy, is what makes the film a retroactive LGBTQ centered film. Also, above the review, it says “Queer character: Angela Baker”.<sup>93</sup> The reviewer means that the revelation of Angela’s true identity explains her mysterious behavior throughout the film. The behavior consists of ways of trying to hide certain physical attributes that could expose her having a male body, something that in the trans community refers to living stealth.

An important assumption that the reviewer makes is that Angela truly is transgender, something they base on the fact that Angela is really attracted to her male love interest and that she never mentions that she wants to go back to being a boy.

Despite the fact that promiscuous people, mainly women, are the most common victims in slasher films, this film kills off the people who mistreated Angela for being different. The film is also (still) ahead of its time regarding depiction of trans women, and especially having a trans woman as lead character. The reviewer also mentions the fact that Angela has a homosexual father.

The reviewer explains how many depictions of trans people work by pure shock value, and despite the fact that this film definitely uses Angela’s “trans-ness” as a shock for the viewer, the reviewer thinks it’s outweighed by the other factors of the film, especially as the film is made way before there was an established awareness of queer culture in society.

The reviewer also mentions that the male fashion sense in the film is an example of how men still were not familiar with gay male culture and dressed in a certain way without fear of being interpreted as homosexual. Because of this seemingly uncomplicated relationship with masculinity, the films made during the 1980s did not have a problem depicting half naked men

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<sup>92</sup> Smclean24 > Queer Movie Reviews Stealth Depiction of Stealth Sleepaway Camp <https://smclean24.wordpress.com/2017/04/14/queer-movie-reviews-stealth-depiction-of-stealth-sleepawaycamp/> Retrieved 1/3-2018).

<sup>93</sup> Smclean24 > Queer Movie Reviews Stealth Depiction of Stealth Sleepaway Camp <https://smclean24.wordpress.com/2017/04/14/queer-movie-reviews-stealth-depiction-of-stealth-sleepawaycamp/> Retrieved 1/3-2018).

being physically close to each other. This fear increased during the 1980s and in the 1990s men avoided to dress this way. With progression, this is slowly getting better again.

On the website for New Beverly cinema, a repertory movie theatre in Beverly Hills (Los Angeles, United states of America), you can find blog posts about the films screened at the cinema. On February 13th, 2017, *Sleepaway Camp* was screened and in connection to this,

there was a post by Witney Seibold about the film published on the website.<sup>94</sup> The title of the post was *The Sexual Politics of Sleepaway Camp* and it centers around the elements of the film, relating to sexuality. Seibold begins by saying that the depiction of homosexuality is of course not as shocking today as it was when this film was made. But despite the fact that the director, Robert Hiltzik has insisted that he only made the film to fit the trends, earn easy money and really did not have any intentions in making a statement about sexual politics, this film is according to Seibold “deeply gay-coded” by the contemporary audience.

Seibold presents the sexual elements depicted in the film, with her father as the first example. The father being homosexual is according to Seibold a very rare trope in films from this time. Homosexual characters have previously been depicted in films, but rarely in mainstream films.<sup>95</sup> Witnessing the father in a sexual situation with his partner is part of Angela’s trauma, one could argue. But the homosexual couple are not villains, nor are they stereotypes.

The second sexual element that Seibold presents is the sexual ambiguity in shape of Angela’s aunt Martha (Desiree Gould). Common theories among the fans of the film is that Martha, because of her performance and heavy makeup, is actually a drag queen or a trans woman, though neither of these theories are true. This is something that Seibold thinks Hiltzik might have had in mind when he casted Desiree Gould as aunt Martha.



<sup>94</sup> Thenewbev > The Sexual Politics of Sleepaway Camp <http://thenewbev.com/blog/2017/02/the-sexualpolitics-of-sleepaway-camp/> (Retrieved 26/2-2018).

<sup>95</sup> Thenewbev > The Sexual Politics of Sleepaway Camp <http://thenewbev.com/blog/2017/02/the-sexualpolitics-of-sleepaway-camp/> (Retrieved 26/2-2018).

The third sexual element presented is the main character herself. Angela finds herself at a summer camp, which is a common place for sex debuts for teenagers. She is almost completely silent throughout the film and bullied for being different. Yet Paul (Christopher Collet), a friend of her cousins', falls in love with her. This causes Angela a lot of sexual anxiety. She is interested in him as well, but when he tries to get intimate with her, she pulls away. Yet, it seems as Angela has a lot of sexual feelings that are awakening throughout the film, something that is not exploited according to Seibold, but seen as innocent and sweet. Despite her extreme actions, Angela is bothered by the things most teenagers are; being in love, being bullied and not being able to understand themselves.

Seibold means that sexuality and sexual politics are handled very casually in the film, but it is possible to argue that the film is really about being bullied for being different and this leading to extreme reactions. The sexual elements of *Sleepaway Camp* seem to, according to Seibold, have potential to be interpreted as problematic, yet revolutionary when put into its film historical context.<sup>96</sup>

After investigating Thisfilmshouldbeplayedloud.com I understood that it was a blog that mostly published reviews of films, yet it was not evident whether it applied any specific purpose or perspective. In the review of *Sleepaway Camp* with the title "Let's talk about the ending of Sleepaway Camp (1983)", the blogger claims that the reason the film is still "living" is because of its shocking and original twist ending.<sup>97</sup> Due to the treatment of transsexuality as a shock factor, something that the reviewer sense might have been more acceptable during the 1980s but is considered being of poor taste according to our contemporary views, the reviewer was skeptical towards the film's final scene before seeing it. They avoided watching the film, thinking that knowing the plot twist made the film uninteresting but realized when finally watching it that it was the execution of the plot twist that made it interesting. Angela's monstrous facial expression and vocalization, the camera cutting between her face and male genitalia combined with the thrilling music

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<sup>96</sup> Thenewbev > The Sexual Politics of Sleepaway Camp <http://thenewbev.com/blog/2017/02/the-sexualpolitics-of-sleepaway-camp/> (Retrieved 26/2-2018).

<sup>97</sup> This Film Should Be Played Loud > Let's talk about the ending of Sleepaway Camp (1983) <https://thisfilmshouldbeplayedloud.com/2016/05/20/lets-talk-about-the-ending-of-sleepaway-camp-1983/> (Retrieved 19/4-2018).

score and the horrified expressions on the camp counsellor's faces is truly disturbing, which according to the reviewer, works in favor for the scene.

The review is generally in the more traditional sense, when the blogger presents their subjective opinions of the film. They describe the film as being goofy with plain directing.

Regarding the films ending scene the reviewer says:

It's suggestions about transgender identity are definitely sinister and the handling somewhat troublesome yet despite Hiltzik's simplistic and insidious vision of transgender trauma, within the genre framework of *Sleepaway Camp* it turns a potentially stupid film into something quite serious.<sup>98</sup>

The depiction of a trans character is according to the reviewer despite its primitiveness effective in this specific context. According to them, Hiltzik's sympathy seems to lie more with Angela than with her victims. An important statement the blogger makes is that the film seems to want to make a point of criticizing psychological abuse rather than transsexuality.

As the title suggests, the article *The best Horror Movie of the '80s: Two Superfans Talk 'Sleepaway Camp'* is an informal discussion between two horror enthusiasts, about *Sleepaway Camp*. It was written by Kerensa Cadenas and Bando Khalrissian (Khal) and posted under the category "pop-culture" on the youth-oriented media platform Complex.com in October 2015.

Kerensa Cadenas is a "Complex Deputy Editor/Lit Aunt" and Bando Khalrissian is a "Complex social Editor/Pops culture" and they share their love for *Sleepaway Camp* but want with this discussion raise awareness of some of the problems with it.<sup>99</sup> The article is structured as a conversation between them both. They use the names "Kerensa" and "Khal" in the article, I will thus use the same names. Khal begins with immediately addressing the issue with the depiction of transsexuality, asking how it could be discussed "Post-Caitlyn Jenner". The article was posted just recently after Caitlyn Jenner came out as transgender, which can be argued as being a milestone for the general acceptance of transsexuality. In relation to this, it

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<sup>98</sup> This Film Should Be Played Loud > [Let's talk about the ending of Sleepaway Camp \(1983\)](https://thisfilmshouldbeplayedloud.com/2016/05/20/lets-talk-about-the-ending-of-sleepaway-camp-1983/)  
<https://thisfilmshouldbeplayedloud.com/2016/05/20/lets-talk-about-the-ending-of-sleepaway-camp-1983/>  
(Retrieved 19/4-2018).

<sup>99</sup> Complex > Pop Culture > Sleepaway Camp is the Best Watch it  
<http://www.complex.com/popculture/2015/10/sleepaway-camp-is-the-best-watch-it> (Retrieved 19/4-2018).

is interesting to revisit a film like horror film like *Sleepaway Camp*, Khal says. Kerensa continues with stating that the film is, despite her love for it, problematic. She continues:

Angela's forced to be a girl by her crazy aunt after her dad (who is gay) dies. Her dad being gay seems like it's supposed to have something to do with this, but that doesn't really make any sense at all since her aunt forced this situation. It's equally homophobic and transphobic, although, we don't know how Angela identifies. Unless that's something that comes up in the later movies, which I haven't seen.<sup>100</sup>

Khal replies that the scenes they both call homophobic are unnecessary for the narrative. Furthermore, the conclusion that Angela becomes a murderer because of her forced gender change is not based on any logic ground. Kerensa means that it is a thin and problematic definition of transgender, as we never know what Angela identifies as and that the motivation Angela has in killing is presented as being when she witnessed her father with his male lover.

The residue of the discussion is generally in a positive note. They describe how much they love the humor, the corniness, the creativeness of the murders, how shocking the final scene is etc. Kerensa questions why despite its cult status, it still has not received the mainstream credit it deserved. This represents the type of fan culture where a cultural artefact might have various problematic features, which the viewer acknowledges but manages to put a side for the sake of another feature. *Sleepaway Camps* "good kills" and creativity is reason enough to love the movie, despite its deeply problematic aspects.

### 3.3 The film and its identity politics

The people who discuss the film are generally very aware of the social impact a film has and include the aspect of how representation affect the reality when they argue. This type of argumentation relates to the politics of identity. This means that the person who is arguing, or the analysis that is provided by this person is highly affected by identity as a tool to promote a certain political standpoint. In this case, it regards the identity connected to LGBTQ rights. That does not mean that the person writing is necessarily a LGBTQ person themselves, it does however mean that supporting these rights is a part of an identity and the line of thought that can be detected in the arguments. Identity politics means identifying with a type of argumentation, not simply as politics but as part of a personal identity. When using this type of argumentation, the question of how the film can be used as politics arises. Deriving from a

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<sup>100</sup> Complex > Pop Culture > Sleepaway Camp is the Best Watch it <http://www.complex.com/popculture/2015/10/sleepaway-camp-is-the-best-watch-it> (Retrieved 19/4-2018).



certain political standpoint, the discussion on how this film may be perceived politically becomes highly central and is influenced by personal identification with these questions. The following blog posts are examples of this type of argumentation.

The owner of the blog [feministfearfreak.blogspot.se](http://feministfearfreak.blogspot.se) presents themselves as a feminist who aims to review horror films partly from a feminist perspective. They base their reviews on a variety of factors, including representation of women and minorities. In October 2014, they reviewed *Sleepaway Camp*. They begin by saying how disappointed they are in the film, expecting it to “blow their mind”, regarding its “awesome gender bending”. But, the reviewer makes it clear already in the first paragraph that they regard the film as transphobic. They say *But I don't do well with transphobia, and that's what I saw here.*<sup>101</sup>



Figure 7 Feministfearfreak- *Sleepaway Camp*

There are a number of elements in the film that the reviewer express discontent with, but I will focus on the ones regarding “queer-ness”. The main issue with the film, according to the reviewer, seems to be that the big revelation of the film is not that the main character is the killer, but that the killer has a penis. The reviewer also describes Angela and Paul’s courtship

<sup>101</sup> Feministfearfreak > Sleepaway-Camp <http://feministfearfreak.blogspot.se/2014/10/sleepaway-camp.html> (Retrieved 3/3-2018).



as awkward, especially the scene where he tries to take Angela's' top off which made her upset, made the reviewer uncomfortable. They also mention the homosexual father. According to the reviewer, we are not meant to sympathize with the main character but be horrified because someone we thought was a girl had a penis. The reviewer also makes one other important statement; because the main character was forced to be a girl against his will, he is not transgender.

Autostraddle is a trans-friendly and feminist online community where the article *Who's Afraid Of The Big, Bad Trans Woman? On Horror and Transfemininity* was published in October 2013.<sup>102</sup> The subject of the article is how transgender women are used as a scare tactic in certain horror films and what consequences these depictions have on the image of trans women in real life. Mey Valdivia Rude, the writer of the article, is herself a trans woman who describes her own personal feelings about these kinds of depictions, but also how they affect transgender people and the view of them. She uses *Sleepaway Camp* as an example of this depiction, next to classics like *Psycho* (1960, Alfred Hitchcock) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991, Jonathan Demme). In these films, the trans women often fills the function of a frightening element and sometimes even the main evil of the film. They are presented as dangerous, mentally ill men dressing up as women.

This trope shows, according to Valdivia Rude, that transgender people are viewed as frightening in themselves. It makes her feel scared in real life, scared that someone will see that she is trans and make a connection between her and the evil person in the film. These depictions, of transgender people as a scare tactic, has created a false image of trans people in the audience minds. They relate transgender women to the characters in the films, being psychopaths and serial killers.

Valdivia Rude means that in these films, where horrible events occur frequently, the most horrifying event is not the macabre murders, but the fact that people who appear to be of a certain gender, reveals themselves as another gender. The final scene from *Sleepaway Camp*, the one where we see that Angela has a penis, is widely considered one of the most shocking

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<sup>102</sup> Autostraddle > Whos Afraid of the Big Bad Trans Woman on Horror and Transfemininity <https://www.autostraddle.com/whos-afraid-of-the-big-bad-trans-woman-on-horror-and-transfemininity-198212/> (Retrieved 14/3-2018).

in film history. Despite the fact that we just learned that Angela is the murderer, and her boyfriends decapitated head roll off from her lap, this is not the biggest revelation.

Another frequent feature is the trans women that is portrayed as mentally ill, and this has occurred as a result of them dressing like women. The idea of transgender people as mentally ill drives the plot of some of these movies and is in real life a common argument for not supporting the rights of trans people. She means that this depiction of trans people reinforce these ideas in the overall culture.

She means that the damage these films make on trans women can be divided into three types:

1. Trans women are presented as mentally ill and being transgender is seen as one part of what makes them this way.
2. Trans women are presented as impostors. They are portrayed as men who pretend or dress up as women.
3. Trans women are presented as dangerous, when in reality, these women are far more likely to be victims of abuse than vice versa.<sup>103</sup>

As depiction of transgender people in popular culture is rare, when they are depicted, it is important in what way. Being one of the few types of depiction of trans people, this also affects how the audience see transgender people. According to Valdivia Rude, this type of depictions contributes to the overall view of trans women, as someone frightening and strange. This view contributes to parents not wanting their children to go to school with trans students. This view contributes to the view that trans people should get institutionalized. This view contributes to trans women getting murdered.

The last post on the blog [sweetperdition.wordpress.com](https://sweetperdition.wordpress.com) was published in 2010, and the blog has a rather outdated structure which makes it difficult to distinguish its purpose and whether it is owned by one single person or a group. Regardless of the context, a blogger with the alias

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<sup>103</sup> Autostraddle > Whos Afraid of the Big Bad Trans Woman on Horror and Transfemininity <https://www.autostraddle.com/whos-afraid-of-the-big-bad-trans-woman-on-horror-and-transfemininity-198212/> (Retrieved 14/3-2018).

“Tera” published a post in August 2008 with the title “OMG! I’ve Found the “Transgender Agenda”!”.<sup>104</sup> The post begins by continuing the earlier mentioned statement with “...In a bad horror movie from the 80’s! (Who knew?)”.

Tera presents and gives a summary of the movie she’s referring to; *Sleepaway Camp*. She claims that Angela’s transgender status is one of the lies that the filmmaker has presented for us, along with the hero turning out to be the villain the boy is also deceiving himself and everyone else by pretending to be a girl.

Tera then argues that what deceived us about Angela is not that she is a transgender person, but that she is a transgender person created by cissexual filmmakers. She refers to the blog [drakyn.blogspot.se/](http://drakyn.blogspot.se/) where it’s pointed out that the concept of a transgendered person who is fooling the society that they have a certain gender is a myth invented by cissexual people. This is based on ignorance regarding gender and the idea that the only two genders that exist are the ones we’re assigned as birth. The transgendered characters we see in movies tend to be cissexuals disguising themselves in order to achieve something. This is according to Tera a simplistic and cissexual-centered view that does not correspond with the truth.

She relates this myth to the consequences it has in real life by inserting a quote about the young transgender woman Angie Zapata that was murdered in 2008. The murder was committed by a man who was on a date Angie and discovered that she had male genitalia by grabbing her between her legs. Tera argues that by assuming someone is cissexual and finding out that they are transgendered does not mean that you have been deceived, but that the assumption is making you deceive yourself.

The interpretations presented in these secondary texts activate the primary text in various ways. Through defining the film according to genre, one determines where the film is situated in relation to other films and connects it in the web of intertextuality. Through including it in certain events, which indicates a specific reception typical for that of cult culture, its cult status is established. Its status as a queer film is also established through these events, indicating that a certain social group might be interested in the film. These definitions activate the primary text as a queer horror film with a cult status. The secondary texts can also activate the primary

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<sup>104</sup> Sweetperdition > Transgender Agenda <https://sweetperdition.wordpress.com/2008/08/04/transgender-agenda2/> (Retrieved 17/4-2018).

film as a representation of transgender people and thus provide visibility for them. However, it can also be activated as a transphobic and homophobic film. Whereas the general audience watching it for the first time in 1983 might have seen the ending scene as a shocking twist, the audience in 2019, (who is aware of the implications it might have, how it relates to other films depicting transgender people as villainous killers, the oppression LGBTQ people are subjected to and might themselves identify with these issues) might see it as highly problematic. If the viewer takes these aspects into consideration when watching the film, they will make assumptions different from that of the inherent features of the film.

#### 4. The tertiary texts

The tertiary text is, as previously mentioned, the informal discussion, mentioning and criticism of the film that the viewers themselves produce. In my case, this consists of the interaction that occurs in the comment sections on blog posts and forum threads. The vertical dimension of intertextuality occurs with the tertiary text as the final step.<sup>105</sup> The secondary and the tertiary texts are dependent on understandings of the primary text, and other texts, because the discussion is to a large extent affected by the film's location in the cultural context. If the primary text can be activated in various ways by the secondary text, the secondary text can be activated by the tertiary text because this is where the interpretation of it occurs. That means that the tertiary text also possesses the potential to affect the primary text. What is interesting in the secondary text is how it is interpreted and when studying the secondary text, I discovered a network of texts connecting to each other and thus creating the tertiary text. The secondary texts were referred to, and frequently creating a discussion in the comment fields. The new text that derives from these comments is dependent on the internet as a social sphere but also on the film itself as primary text, because of its high relevance in the discussions. The following posts and correspondences are examples of this spiderweb of texts, where a network is formed through communication.

The blog post "Horror Week 2011: Sleepaway Camp" was published by Amber Leab on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011, on the website "Bitch Flicks".<sup>106</sup> Bitch flicks is a website with the purpose to review films and television through a feminist perspective. The blog post begins with a

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<sup>105</sup> You could however argue that there is no final step according to this theory, because the tertiary text might in its turn lead to a new primary text.

<sup>106</sup> Bitch Flicks> Horror Week 2011 Sleepaway Camp <http://www.bitchflicks.com/2011/10/horror-week-2011sleepaway-camp.html#.XMMo--gzZPY> (Retrieved 24/4-2019).

short summary of the film. Leab continues to discuss the end and presents a significant statement:

The ending is profoundly disturbing, not because Peter is a murderer or because he is a cross-dresser (because his female presentation is against his will, it isn't accurate to call him transgender), but because he has been abused so deeply by his aunt and his peers that he can't find a way to cope.<sup>107</sup>

Leab chooses to use the name Peter instead of Angela and argues that despite the actions of Peter making him the villain, it's the bullies at the camp and Peter's aunt who's really villainous. The problem is however, that what the film wants us to be horrified by is the fact that Peter is not a girl. The revelation in the end is supposed to shock and disgust us, which is according to Leab deeply transphobic.

Leab refers to Tera's blog post on [sweetperdition.wordpress.com](http://sweetperdition.wordpress.com), which was previously mentioned in the section *The Film and its Identity Politics*. She cites the part of the blog post where Tera writes about Angela's character being a transgender person created by cissexual filmmakers and thus reinforcing the myth of transgender people disguising themselves to fool society. This derives, according to Tera and Leab, from a cissexist assumption that the biological sex and gender presentation must match. We have identified with Peter throughout the movie, and we're supposed to fear him when he reveals his true self; as a murderer and a boy. According to Tera and Leab, the deception is caused by a cisgendered idea that sex and gender must align in a specific way. Leab argues that the revelation could have been executed in a more appropriate way if it played out earlier in the film, providing the viewer an ability to digest the information.

She goes on to argue that despite the previously mentioned cissexism, the film is in some ways progressive. The fact that Peter's father is homosexual is, according to Leab, a subversive aspect of the film due to the traditionally derogatory depiction of gay parenting in films.

The post has received one comment. It was posted by "dik4but", two years after the original post and it reads;

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<sup>107</sup> Bitch Flicks > Horror Week 2011 Sleepaway Camp <http://www.bitchflicks.com/2011/10/horror-week-2011/sleepaway-camp.html#.XMMo--gzZPY> (Retrieved 24/4-2019).

Interesting read, though I'm not sure how praise-worthy the film's portrayal of gay parenting was. The implication, it seemed to me, was that seeing his Dads together contributed to Peter's sexual confusion, hence the flashback scene straight after of the kids sitting on the bed, with Peter especially showing interest in Angela's appearance as a girl. Not as overt as the films' transphobia, of course, but problematic all the same. Great film though, and easy enough to forgive of a thirty year-old slasher film.<sup>108</sup>

### One Comment



**dik4but**

Posted October 26, 2013 at 8:01 am | [Permalink](#)

Interesting read, though I'm not sure how praise-worthy the film's portrayal of gay parenting was. The implication, it seemed to me, was that seeing his Dads together contributed to Peter's sexual confusion, hence the flashback scene straight after of the kids sitting on the bed, with Peter especially showing interest in Angela's appearance as a girl. Not as overt as the films' transphobia, of course, but problematic all the same. Great film though, and easy enough to forgive of a thirty year-old slasher film.

*Figure 8 Bitch Flicks- Sleepaway Camp Comment*

The website [sleepawaycamp.wordpress.com](http://sleepawaycamp.wordpress.com) is “The Unofficial Sleepaway Camp Website”. The person behind the website doesn't state their name or even call themselves by a nickname, possibly due to the fact that the website dates back to 1998 and websites then didn't follow the same conventions as they do now. The person explains that they have been obsessed with Sleepaway Camp since they saw it the first time in 1995, when they were nineteen years old. Because of this obsession, they spent a lot of time analyzing and writing about the film. This led them to create the website, they phrase it like this:

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<sup>108</sup> Bitch flicks> Horror Week 2011 Sleepaway Camp <http://www.bitchflicks.com/2011/10/horror-week-2011/sleepaway-camp.html#.XMMo--gzZPY> (Retrieved 24/4-2019).

I created the first Sleepaway Camp website on the internet. It was 1998 and the internet was still novel. Sleepaway Camp was still a mystery. My website and the relationship I have with Sleepaway Camp parallels my mind. Chaotic, confused, and undoubtedly everchanging.<sup>109</sup>

They continue to say that they have “brought this website back down to basics. Because it’s all a fan really needs”. They have removed unnecessary content and kept the most important. They argue that you don’t need a website to connect with *Sleepaway Camp*, just watching it and absorbing it is all you need. They don’t really explain in a concrete way what the purpose of the webpage is, it seems however to simply be a place for fans of *Sleepaway Camp* to discuss the film and various aspects of it.

The last post was published in July of 2017 and it features pictures of the place where the movie was filmed. The homepage lists what seems to be all the posts made on the page (or at least the ones that were kept after the removal of unnecessary content) and they seem to touch upon various subjects, however, the films connections to gender seems to be a reoccurring theme.

One blog post that was published the fourth of April in 2013, was written by the user “SC83X” and the title of it is “Trans love, Sleepaway Camp style”.<sup>110</sup> It states that it is unfortunate that trans people are often depicted in unfavorable situations in film in general, and the horror genre in particular. *Sleepaway Camp* is according to the blogger one of a number of horror films that portrays trans people having psychological trauma that manifests as violent and deviant behavior. The blogger does however find it important to recognize that these characters deviant and psychotic behavior is not due to them being trans, but they were traumatized prior to their transition. The blogger argues that because they were not trans by choice, they can’t be considered accurate representations of trans people. They continue:

Often in psychological horror the alternate self requires the transition between genders and is actually used to pacify the traumatized individual. The act of transitioning is needed to retain a sense of sanity and safety. In essence, the transition between genders is life saving, therefore making it a *positive* thing.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> The Unofficial Sleepaway Camp Website > About <https://sleepawaycamp.wordpress.com/about/> (Retrieved 3/5-2019).

<sup>110</sup> The Unofficial Sleepaway Camp Website > Trans Love Sleepaway Camp Style <https://sleepawaycamp.wordpress.com/2013/04/04/trans-love-sleepaway-camp-style/#comments> (Retrieved 3/52019).

<sup>111</sup> The Unofficial Sleepaway Camp Website > Trans Love Sleepaway Camp Style <https://sleepawaycamp.wordpress.com/2013/04/04/trans-love-sleepaway-camp-style/#comments> (Retrieved 3/52019).



An important statement that they make, and that contradicts everything that previous criticisms of depiction of transgender people as mentally ill monsters argues is that by using gender transition in films as a narrative function is necessary for the self-preservation of characters who uses gender transition as a coping mechanism. Thus, the purpose of depicting transgender characters as killers is not to portray transgender people as monstrous in general.

The user “Kimsummers” replied to this blog post on the fifth of April 2013. The title of their comment is “2 thoughts on “Trans love, Sleepaway Camp style”” and it reads:

“The transition between genders if life saving, therefore making it a positive thing” so well said. :) Living a lie everyday is destructive for any trans person.<sup>112</sup>

“Kimsummers” profile picture features the official “Transgender pride flag” which indicate that this user is familiar with these types of subjects and what they write could indicate that they might even be transgender themselves. Despite their comment being of the informal kind, they found a place where they can discuss important subjects such as what the struggle for transgender people can be like. In this example, the place to discuss these matters is a platform made specifically for a 1980s slasher movie.



Figure 9 The Unofficial Sleepaway Camp Website- Trans Love Sleepaway Camp Style Comment

<sup>112</sup> The Unofficial Sleepaway Camp Website > Trans Love Sleepaway Camp Style <https://sleepawaycamp.wordpress.com/2013/04/04/trans-love-sleepaway-camp-style/#comments> (Retrieved 3/52019).



The reddit thread “We need to talk about Sleepaway Camp” was posted by “buffangel808” during the spring of 2018 (the date is not specified).<sup>113</sup> They say that despite the fact that they can understand that people like “the camp” and the ending, they find some aspects of the film to be particularly outdated. They are surprised that they did not find more critical discussions online about the homophobia and sexualization of underage actors. They ask the other users whether they are bothered by these aspects of the film or if they consider them a part of the “campy enjoyment”. The post received 21 comments, many of which are of interest.

However, the top voted comment is made by the user “sheistheslayer”:

What homophobia are we talking about exactly? Maybe I missed something.

EDIT: I realize that comes off as snarky, but Sleepaway Camp is one of my favorite movies and in recent years it has been labeled transphobic and homophobic when *it is not*. Spoiler<sup>114</sup>

Under ”spoiler” there is a hyper link where the user has added why they do not consider the film transphobic and homophobic, they hide it in the link to make sure people who have not seen the movie will not get it “spoiled” by reading the post. Here they write about how Angela seeing her father with his male lover is not homophobic, but plausible. It is not a LGBTQ film, it is a film about someone who was forced to live as the wrong gender, which was the reason she killed. When she finally hit puberty, she developed feelings for a boy. ”Buffyangel808” replied:

Two things specifically: the random inclusion of her father in bed with a man. This is to imply what? That she had a fucked up childhood? That's just my interpretation, but at the same time my question would be...why include it at all then? The second being the ending, which I don't personally agree is homophobic, but is an example of something that might be perceived that way.

EDIT: I totally understand that she didn't choose to be Angela, that's why the transphobia doesn't make so much sense to me. It's interesting you said you've heard it being labeled as problematic, because I think the majority is on your side.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Reddit> We Need to Talk About Sleepaway Camp  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/horror/comments/8819fv/we\\_need\\_to\\_talk\\_about\\_sleepaway\\_camp/](https://www.reddit.com/r/horror/comments/8819fv/we_need_to_talk_about_sleepaway_camp/) (Retrieved 8/52019).

<sup>114</sup> Reddit> We Need to Talk About Sleepaway Camp  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/horror/comments/8819fv/we\\_need\\_to\\_talk\\_about\\_sleepaway\\_camp/](https://www.reddit.com/r/horror/comments/8819fv/we_need_to_talk_about_sleepaway_camp/) (Retrieved 8/52019).

<sup>115</sup> Reddit> We Need to Talk About Sleepaway Camp  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/horror/comments/8819fv/we\\_need\\_to\\_talk\\_about\\_sleepaway\\_camp/](https://www.reddit.com/r/horror/comments/8819fv/we_need_to_talk_about_sleepaway_camp/) (Retrieved 8/52019).

”Sheistheslayer” replies again and includes another hyper link, where they say that they think the purpose of the scene with the gay father is to show Angela’s inflected feelings over sexuality and gender. She is a boy who has been forced to live most of her life as a girl, and now she likes another boy.

”Sheistheslayer” also includes a link to another reddit thread which touches upon the same subject and argues that when watching the film, it is important to take the changes in society that has occurred since the 1980s into consideration. They go on to compliment “Buffyangel808” for their username, which is a reference to the cult TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003, Joss Whedon) and say that they respect their opinion. They do however think that there is a misconception of the film that is spread when young horror fans analyze it in relation to the conventions of the new millennium.

“Buffyangel808” responds that this was the point of the original post. Looking at the film through the eyes of a person living in the late 2010s, we interpret certain aspects as problematic when we need to overlook these aspects because of the difference in time. They do however wonder what” Sheistheslayer” think about the sexualization of young actors, considering that it’s their favorite movie. ”Sheistheslayer” replies that this is a realistic feature that makes the movie even more scary.

The discussion in the thread is generally respectful and the users seem to consider each other’s opinions as important. What is interesting with this correspondence in particular is the fact that it seems as though it started out from one standpoint but ended up somewhere slightly different. “Buffyangel808”’s original opinion was that the film was homophobic and inappropriately sexualizing of young actors, but through the correspondence with ”Sheistheslayer”, it seems as though they broadened their view point and considered whether the film might in fact just be a cultural artefact from the past where our modern analysis is inadequate.

## 5. Results and discussion

With the internet conquering more and more ground, the abilities for marginalized groups to create a sense of belonging is also increasing. The same can be said for subcultures, cult communities and obscure interests. Connecting with others like yourself, regardless of how non-normative you might be, is easier with the access of internet. A film like *Sleepaway Camp*

would most likely be discussed in meetings for local cult clubs and between friends before the internet. Queer people watching the film, wondering about how to deal with the fact that they finally were represented but yet again through a derogatory stereotype of transgender people being monsters, are given an opportunity to share and discuss their thoughts.

On the internet there are opportunities for a discussion about something obscure to be shared and commented, and then lead to another discussion which in extension leads to a sense of belonging. In the examples presented in this study, one blog post is referred to by another blog post, which is commented on. The subject discussed is the depiction of a transgender person in a fairly obscure (in mainstream contexts) slasher film from the 1980s. Fiske's theory of primary, secondary and tertiary texts is over thirty years old and refers to television and not the internet, it is however very clear that it's just as relevant when analyzing the internet.

In order to understand why this specific cultural artefact, *Sleepaway Camp*, has been reborn, you must consider aspects deriving both from film studies and media studies. Film analysis provides us with an explanation for why this specific film is still interesting. The film entails a few important key themes; the queer character, its role as a cult film and its role as a horror film. These themes are frequently discussed online, and in order to understand how communication online plays in, you need tools deriving from media studies. The internet is a social sphere which has increased the opportunities to find a sense of belonging, especially for marginalized people. The combination of these fields is the strength of my study and proves that they are crucial in the execution of a study like this. Media and film studies are becoming more and more converged, yet, they tend to get overrun by each other. Actually combining them, without letting one of them cancel the other out, in a similar way as it has been done in this study could be a fruitful way of handling research in the future.

When performing this study, I initially needed to distinguish which aspects of it I wished to examine. I determined that what I wanted to examine was its queer elements and how/if these were essential in its online afterlife. I reached this decision through the film's ending scene's strong impact on me and my fascination of what others might have discussed in regard to it. I then determined that a fruitful way to understand what occurs in the film's active life online was to study it according to Fiske's theory. I analyzed the primary text, the film, with analytical perspectives and tools deriving from film studies as a method. Through my analysis of the film, I determined that it can be strongly associated with sexuality and gender identity.

Because of Angela's own identity and her father's relationship, it can be interpreted as having queer elements, no matter how these elements are perceived. Because of my interest being placed with the *online* afterlife, I gathered the secondary and tertiary texts with digital ethnography as a method. In order to examine the specific behavior performed within a specific group, namely people interested in the film and how it relates to queer issues, I took help from netnography. The purpose of netnography is to understand and interpret internet and thus the cultural and social life that exists on and through the internet, in my case this was performed by beginning with an open search for a few keywords on Google. I then followed the analysis process used in Marciano's study by distinguishing patterns in how the film was discussed and then interpret these patterns in relation to how they are produced and maintained.

These patterns could be discussed in terms of *Defining the genre*, *The film and its potential to provide visibility* and *The film and its identity politics*. The conclusions I made based on these patterns is that it activates the primary text as a queer horror film with a cult status that could arguably be considered a representation of transgender people and thus provide visibility for them. It could however also be activated as a highly problematic film due to the implications of depicting a transgender person as a villainous killer. These interpretations all possess the ability to activate the primary text, how they activate it is however dependent on the reading by a socially and historically situated viewer. The meaning that emerges when a viewer who might identify with being queer and a fan of cult culture sees *Sleepaway Camp* at an event for "queer horror" in 2019 might be as a fun representation of gender-nonconforming people in shorts and crop tops, associated with enjoyment and playfulness. Whereas the meaning that emerges when another viewer sees *Sleepaway Camp* in 2019, after reading about yet another murder on a transgender woman, might be as yet another depiction of transgender people as dangerous and monstrous.

I interpreted the sources that formally refer to the film as secondary, and the sources that refer to the secondary text and/or have received replies as tertiary texts. I have interpreted the tertiary texts this way because giving rise to communication indicates the emergence of meaning. Through the convergence of the primary and secondary text, by discussing the film as a primary text in relation to blog posts etc. as secondary texts, the tertiary text is formed. This is where it becomes clear that the primary and the secondary text, together with the social and historical context of the viewer, influence the final opinion.

The conclusion I make out of this is that the film's role as a queer horror film and the celebration of it at events typical for that of cult culture is an important factor in its online afterlife. LGBTQ and cult communities has benefitted from the emergence and easy access of internet. The film is thus frequently discussed in fora concerning LGBTQ identity and cult culture. These discussions generally follow certain patterns, and the film can be activated in various ways, but how the film is interpreted is dependent on the social and historical context of the viewer.

## 6. References

### 6.1 Filmography

Original title: Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Production company: Mutant Enemy, Kuzui Enterprises, Sandollar Television, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television

Production country: United states of America

Producer: Fran Rubel Kuzui, Kaz Kuzui, Joss Whedon, Gail Berman, Gareth Davies etc.

Year of release: 1997-2003 Director:

Joss Whedon etc.

Manuscript: Joss Whedon, Steven S. Deknight, Jane Espenson, David Fury etc.

Cinematography: Michael Gershman, Raymond Stella, Kenneth Zunder, Michael D. O'Shea, Donald M. Morgan

Editor: Regis Kimble, Peter Basinski, Skip Macdonald, Nancy Forner etc.

Actors: Sarah Michelle Gellar (Buffy), Nicholas Brendon (Xander), Alyson Hannigan (Willow) etc.

Original title: The Celluloid Closet

Production company: Channel Four Films, HBO productions

Production country: United states of America

Producer: Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman

Year of release: 1995

Director: Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman

Manuscript: Vito Russo, Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman, Sharon Wood, Armistead Mauplin

Cinematography: Nancy Schreiber

Editor: Jeffrey Friedman, Arnold Glassman

Actors: Lily Tomlin (narrator), Susie Bright (herself), Whoopi Goldberg (herself), Tony

Curtis (himself), Arthur Laurents (himself), Armistead Maupin (himself), Jan Oxenberg (himself), Harvey Fierstein (himself) etc.

Original title: Female Trouble

Production company: Dreamland, Saliva films

Production country: United states of America

Producer: John Waters, Jochen Breitenstein, Jimmy Hutzler, James McKenzie, Leroy Morais

Year of release: 1974

Director: John Waters

Manuscript: John Waters

Cinematography: John Waters

Editor: Charles Roggero, John Waters

Actors: Divine (Dawn Davenport/Earl Peterson), David Lochary (Donald Dasher), Mary

Vivian Pearce (Donna Dasher), Mink Stole (Taffy Davenport) etc.

Original title: Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>

Production company: Georgetown Productions

Production country: United states of America

Producer: Sean S. Cunningham, Alvin Geiler, Steve Miner.

Year of release: 1980

Director: Sean S. Cunningham

Manuscript: Victor Miller, Ron Kurz.

Cinematography: Barry Abrams

Editor: Susan E. Cunningham, Jay Keuper.

Actors: Betsy Palmer (Mrs. Voorhees), Ari Lehman (Jason Voorhees), Adrienne King (Alice Hardy), Harry Crosby III (Bill Brown).

Original title: Psycho

Production company: Shamley Productions

Production country: United states of America

Producer: Alfred Hitchcock

Year of release: 1960

Director: Alfred Hitchcock

Manuscript: Joseph Stefano, Robert Bloch.

Cinematography: John L. Russell

Editor: Jim Wilkinson, George Tomasini.

Actors: Janet Leigh (Marion Crane), Anthony Perkins (Norman Bates), Vera Miles (Lila Crane), John Gavin (Sam Loomis) etc.

Original title: The Rocky Horror Picture Show

Production company: Michael White Productions

Production country: United states of America

Producer: Lou Adler, John Goldstone, Michael White

Year of release: 1975

Director: Jim Sharman

Manuscript: Richard O'Brien, Jim Sharman

Cinematography: Peter Suschitzky

Editor: Graeme Clifford

Actors: Tim Curry (Dr. Frank-N-Furter), Susan Sarandon (Janet Weiss), Barry Bostwick (Brad Majors), Richard O'Brien (Riff Raff), Patricia Quinn (Magenta) etc.

Original title: Silence of the Lambs

Production company: Strong Heart, Demme Production, Orion pictures

Production country: United states of America

Producer: Grace Blake, Ron Bozman, Gary Goetzman, Edward Saxon, Kenneth Utt.

Year of release: 1991

Director: Jonthan Demme

Manuscript: Thomas Harris, Ted Tally

Cinematography: Tak Fujimoto

Editor: Craig McKay

Actors: Jodie Foster (Clarice Starling), Anthony Hopkins (Dr. Hannibal Lecter), Scott Glenn (Jack Crawford), Ted Levine (Jame "Buffalo Bill" Gumb), Anthony Heald (Dr. Frederick Chilton), Brooke Smith (Catherine Martin) etc.

Original title: Sleepaway Camp

Production company: American Eagle Films

Production country: United states of America

Producer: Jerry Silva and Michele Tatosian

Year of release: 1983

Director: Robert Hiltzik

Manuscript: Robert Hiltzik

Cinematography: Benjamin Davis and David M. Walsh

Editor: Ron Kalish, Ralph Rosenblum and Sharyn Ross

Actors: Felissa Rose (Angela), Jonathan Tiersten (Ricky), Karen Fields (Judy), Christopher Collet (Paul), Desiree Gould (Aunt Martha) etc.

Original title: Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers

Production company: Double Helix Films

Production country: United states of America

Producer: Robert F. Phillips, Jerry Silva, Michael A. Simpson and Stan Wakefield

Year of release: 1988

Director: Michael A. Simpson

Manuscript: Fritz Gordon

Cinematography: Bill Mills

Editor: John David Allen

Actors: Pamela Springsteen (Angela), Renée Estevez (Molly), Tony Higgins (Sean), Valerie Hartman (Ally) etc.

Original title: Sleepaway Camp III: Teenage Wasteland

Production company: Double Helix Films

Production country: United states of America

Producer: Robert F. Phillips, Jerry Silva, Michael A. Simpson and Stan Wakefield

Year of release: 1989

Director: Michael A. Simpson

Manuscript: Fritz Gordon

Cinematography: Bill Mills

Editor: John David Allen and Amy Carey

Actors: Pamela Springsteen (Angela), Tracy Griffith (Marcia), Michael J. Pollard (Herman), Mark Oliver (Tony) etc.

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